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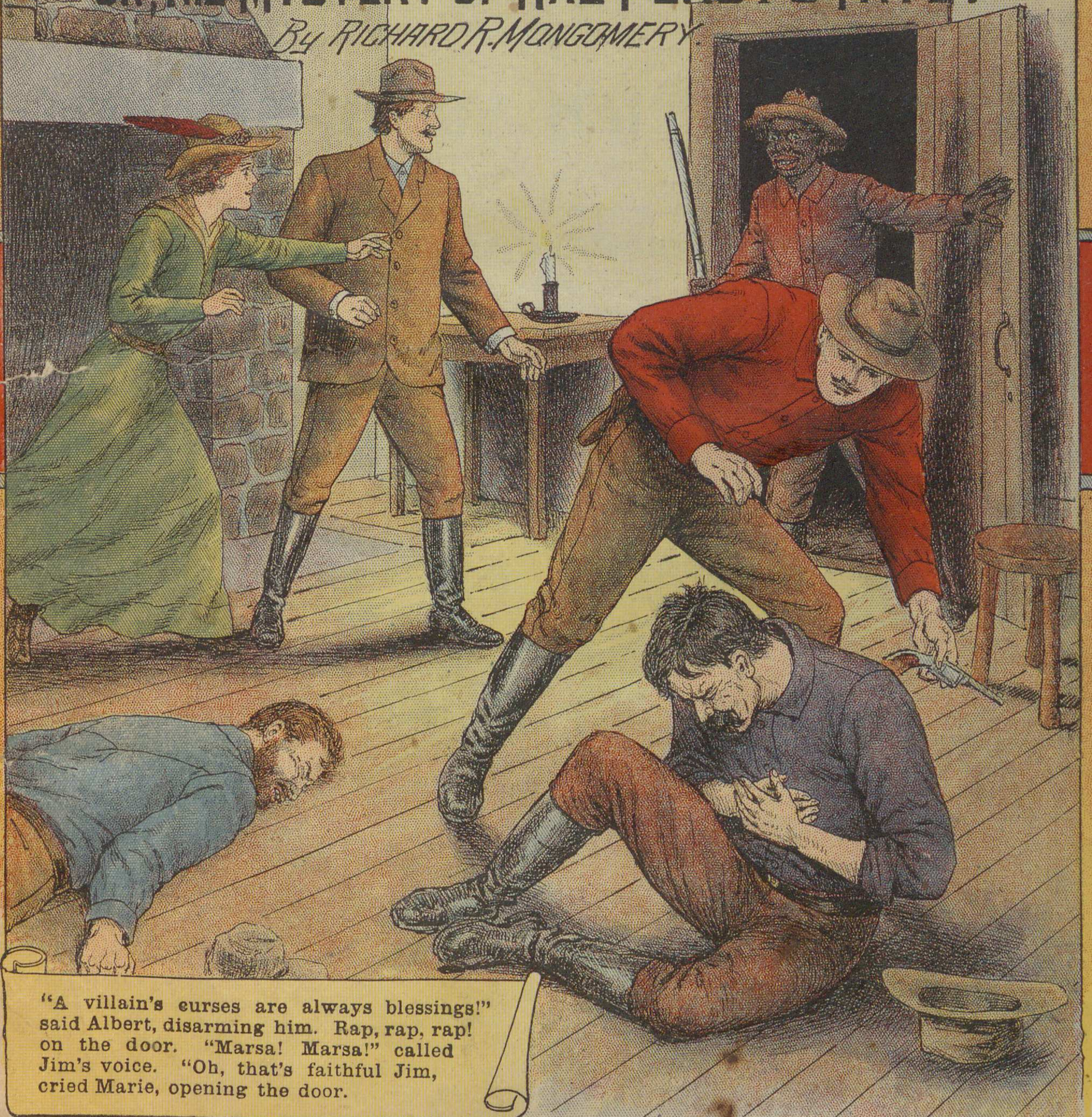
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PLUCK AND LUCK

THE HUT IN THE SWAMP.
OR, THE MYSTERY OF HAL PERCY'S FATE.

By RICHARD R. MONTGOMERY.



"A villain's curses are always blessings!" said Albert, disarming him. Rap, rap, rap! on the door. "Marsa! Marsa!" called Jim's voice. "Oh, that's faithful Jim, cried Marie, opening the door.

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PLUCK AND LUCK

Stories of Adventure.

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THE HUT IN THE SWAMP

OR,

THE MYSTERY OF HAL PERCY'S FATE

By Richard R. Montgomery

CHAPTER I.

THE MERCHANT PRINCE AND THE DETECTIVE.

In one of the great mercantile houses in the Crescent City, the proprietor is seated in his private office.

He had just touched a small silver bell on his desk.

A youth answered the summons.

"Pierre," said the merchant, "tell Mr. Percy to come here a moment."

Pierre retired, and a few minutes later a young man entered the sanctum sanctorum of the establishment.

"You sent for me, uncle?"

"Yes, Hal, I have need of your services to-night. I want you to go over the river and——"

"Why, the boats have all gone!" exclaimed the young man.

"Yes, I know that. But for that fact I would not have sent for you."

"Well, I am at your service, uncle."

"Thanks. Do you think you could ride to St. Armand's Landing before midnight?"

Hal Percy started.

His face flushed for a moment, and then all the blood seemed to leave it. An eager light shone in his eyes.

"Yes, uncle," he replied, "and much farther if necessary."

"Ah, I knew I could depend on you. Do you see this package?"

"Yes, sir."

"It was to have gone down by the boat. By an oversight it was not sent. St. Armand will be very much disappointed, if not downright angry, at not receiving it. It contains ten thousand dollars, and some important accounts which he requested to have sent down to him to-day. He is one of our heaviest customers, you know; his crop of cotton and sugar last year amounting to over one hundred thousand dollars. We cannot afford to give him any cause of complaint. This is why I desire you to take a horse and set out at once for St. Armand's plantation."

"Very well, uncle," said young Percy; "I will be ready to start in a half hour."

"Very good. Don't lose any time I would rather kill the horse than have you lose an hour."

Hal Percy left the presence of his uncle and hastened to prepare for the trip. He sent a servant—for it was in the old slave days before the war—around to the stable for his horse, and then went to his room for a change of clothing.

"It's a hard ride, of thirty good miles," he said to himself, as he wended his way to his bachelor apartments; "but it's a good road, and—and—the moon is full and bright. I can make good time with Selim. He is a fleet runner, and—and—she is there. I'll see her again—the angelic Marie! I love her! I love her!"

His eyes shone with the light of anticipated happiness as he hurried his preparations to depart.

Thrusting a revolver in his breast-pocket of his coat, he locked the door of his room and hastened back to the store.

There he found the servant waiting with his horse.

His uncle, Andrea Lamont, handed him the package addressed to "Jules St. Armand, St. Armand's Landing," with the query:

"Are you armed, Hal?"

"Yes, sir. I have my revolver."

"That will do. You will have no need of it, perhaps; but still, it is wise to go armed at night. Good luck to you. If you like, you can remain there a day or two."

"Thanks. I may avail myself of your kindness."

"Ah! I suspected as much!"—and the indulgent merchant laughed significantly. "Off with you now. Transact my business first, and then look out for your own."

Uncle and nephew shook hands, and then the latter bounded into the saddle.

The next moment the spirited horse sprang forward at the touch of the spur and bore him away to his fate.

Three days later, Andrea Lamont was seated in his private

office, when he was surprised at seeing Jules St. Armand, the wealthiest planter on the river, enter.

"Ah! St. Armand!" he exclaimed, springing to his feet. "This is an unexpected pleasure! I hope you are well and——"

"Monsieur Lamont," returned the planter, with stately dignity, a frown on his bronzed face, "I am quite well, thank you. I have called to request that my accounts with your firm be immediately placed in a condition to be closed."

"Mon Dieu! What's the matter, St. Armand?" exclaimed the excited merchant.

The exclamation seemed to surprise the planter. He glanced quickly at him and asked:

"Why was not my request of five days since attended to?"

Andrea Lamont turned pale.

"Jules St. Armand!" he gasped, "have you not seen my nephew, Hal Percy?"

"No!" and the planter's astonishment increased. "What of him? Where is he?"

Andrea Lamont dropped into his great easy-chair, brushed his hand across his brow, as if to put aside something that obscured his vision. Then he looked up at St. Armand in a dazed sort of way.

"Lamont!" cried the planter, "what's the matter? What means this emotion? Speak! Tell me all!"

"St. Armand, be seated," said Lamont, motioning to a chair.

"I—am—so unstrung that—I—know not what I am saying."

He touched the little silver bell that stood on the desk in front of him.

Pierre entered in answer to the call.

"A bottle of wine and glasses, Pierre," said the merchant.

Two minutes later the wine was on the table.

Both men filled their glasses and drank their contents without uttering a word.

Setting down his glass, the planter looked at the merchant, as if waiting for him to explain his extraordinary emotions.

"Your request was promptly attended to, St. Armand," said the merchant, "but in some strange manner the package was overlooked when other things were sent to the boat. A half-hour later I made the discovery that it had not been sent. I lost no time in persuading my nephew, Hal Percy, to mount his horse and ride post-haste with the package in his pocket. He said he would reach you fully as soon as the steamer would, and I believed he would. You have not seen him?"

"No. He has not made his appearance at my place," answered St. Armand. "I must apologize for my rudeness. I was under the impression that my request had been ignored."

"No apology is necessary, St. Armand," said the merchant. "You had the right to think and act as you did. But, in the name of heaven, where is Hal Percy?"

"Ah! Where is he? You are sure of his fidelity?"

"As sure as I am of yours and mine," replied Lamont. "He has left five times as much behind as he has with him. No, no, something has happened to him. I must think, I must think!" and the bewildered merchant clapped his hand to his brow, as if to confine his thoughts and keep them from wandering.

"I think we ought to call in the detectives and lay the case before them," remarked the planter, now dropping his reserve altogether. "He is a very worthy young man, and his whereabouts ought to be looked after."

"Yes, yes," answered the merchant. "I will see about it. Hal—Hal—Hal Percy!"

The planter glanced uneasily at the merchant for a moment or two, and asked:

"Were you much attached to your nephew, Monsieur Lamont?"

"Mon Dieu, yes. He was my only sister's only child. I loved him as a son."

"I sincerely hope no evil has befallen him," remarked St.

Armand. "As for the papers he had in his possession, they can be duplicated, I presume?"

"Yes, very easily."

"Then I will call again in the afternoon."

"Very well; I shall be glad to see you."

The planter went out and hastened to find some friends, on whom he always called when he came to the city. Andrea Lamont, however, remained in his office in a semi-dazed condition. He could not, on any satisfactory hypothesis, account for the strange conduct of his nephew.

"He has been foully dealt with, I fear," he muttered to himself a dozen times in a short half hour. "Hal would not do a wrong act under any circumstances. I would vouch for his fidelity with my life. He was glad to get a change—a chance to go, as it would give him an opportunity to see Marie St. Armand. I know, from what his Cousin Albert told me, that he is much attached to her. He knows he is to be one of my heirs, and—no, no! Hal never did a wrong thing in his life. Something has happened to him. I will send for a detective, and lay the case before him;" and he again rang the silver-bell on his desk.

Pierre responded with alacrity.

"Send Ellis here."

The dutiful youth hastened to obey.

The man Ellis came, hat in hand.

"Ellis, do you know where the Central Detective Office is?" the merchant asked.

"No, sir," was the reply; "but I know where I can find out all about it."

"Where?"

"The policeman on the block ought to know, sir."

"Sure enough. Here, take this note and take it to the chief of the detectives, and wait for an answer. A man may possibly come with you. Lose no time about it."

Ellis lost no time.

He found the policeman on the corner, to whom he applied for information. Having obtained the locality of the detectives headquarters, he repaired there and delivered the note.

The man in charge read it very carefully, and said to him:

"Say to Mr. Lamont that one of our best men will call within an hour."

Ellis bowed himself out and returned to the store, fully convinced that a robbery had been committed on the premises, else why would Mr. Lamont need a detective?

CHAPTER II.

THE DREAM OF ALBERT LAMONT.

Mr. Lamont waited very patiently for the appearance of the detective.

The moment the man came he was shown into the private office of the merchant.

"You are Mr. Lamont?" he asked.

"Yes," answered the merchant, "and you are——"

"Antoine DeGive. I am from the Central Detective Office."

"Ah! very good. Take a seat. You have had much experience as a detective, have you?"

"Yes, sir; I have had quite a varied experience," was the reply of the detective, as he seated himself opposite the merchant prince.

"Glad to hear it, sir. I have a case that may require the services of a man of a very wide experience."

"I can judge of that when I hear what it is," said DeGive.

"So you can. Here it is then," and Mr. Lamont related the case as it is already known to the reader.

The detective listened patiently without asking a single question, till the merchant was through with the story. Then he

proceeded to ask if there were any motives existing why Hal Percy should go away.

"No," answered the merchant. "On the contrary, he is my heir, or one of them, and leaves more behind him in my possession than belongs to him than the amount he carried away with him."

"Then his absence is not voluntary?" remarked DeGive.

"Indeed, no. It is impossible."

"There is foul play somewhere between here and St. Armand's Landing. Do you desire me to take up the case and investigate it?"

"Yes; take it in hand and draw on me for all funds needed."

The detective then drew forth a memorandum, and wrote therein all the points he desired to preserve, after which he took his departure, saying he would investigate the affair immediately.

Albert Lamont, another nephew of Andrea Lamont, and cousin to Hal Percy, saw the detective leave his uncle's private office, and a sudden pallor came over him. He gazed after him till he disappeared from view, and muttered to himself:

"What is the matter, I wonder? I hope nothing has happened to Hal, and yet he was to have returned yesterday."

Suddenly Pierre came up and said to him:

"Mr. Lamont wishes to see you, sir."

"Very well," and he hastened to join his uncle in the little private office.

He saw that something was wrong.

"Uncle," he said, "something has happened to Hal. What is it?"

"Ah! I only wish I knew, Albert," answered the merchant. "Mr. St. Armand called here to-day and said that Hal had not appeared at his place."

"Oh, my dream! my dream!" exclaimed Albert Lamont, turning very pale. "I understand it now. I did not think much of it then. Oh, Hal! Hal! my dear cousin!"

In the name of God what are you talking about!" exclaimed Andrea Lamont, in a burst of terrified amazement.

"I had a dream about Hal the night he left," answered Albert, "and now I see that the dream was true. I never thought much about it, though I would never have told him of it had he been here. I have never been in any way superstitious about dreams, but in this case I am sure there is some terrible meaning attached to it."

"What is it? What was it? What did you dream?" and the excited merchant dropped back into the chair and looked up at the young man with an eager, inquiring glance. "Sit down and tell me all about it."

Albert Lamont sat down and began his story.

"Cousin Hal came to me," he said, "and told me he was going to ride all the way to St. Armand's that evening. He seemed elated, for he is a great admirer of Marie St. Armand."

"Yes—yes—go on."

"Well, that night in my sleep I had a dream. I saw Hal and another man riding along the river-road together. The moon was shining brightly, and the scene was one of great beauty. They both gazed upon the dancing moonbeams on the water, and commented on their silvery flashes. On their left was a great swamp that seemed to be impenetrable. Owls hooted in every direction, but Hal and his companion did not seem to mind them in the least. By and by Hal seemed to be troubled about something, and halted, as if hesitating to go any further. His companion talked to him, and then they resumed their journey. Just how it happened I don't know, but they met two men in the road. The strangers directed them to take another road, and they did so. The road seemed to lead right into the swamp. As they disappeared in the swamp I woke up."

"Is that all of your dream?" his uncle asked.

"No, sir. When I slept again, I saw Hal and his companion on foot in front of a hut in the swamp, talking to five men. The five men had rifles in their hands. Hal seemed to be in great trouble, and turned away as if to leave. His comrade followed him. The hut stood in the center of a small clearing in the swamp, on a gentle rise. Around this clearing was a sand bottom partially under water. Hal and his friend walked directly toward this sand bottom, the five men standing there by the hut in the clear moonlight gazing after him. Suddenly Hal uttered an exclamation. His comrade did the same, and then both seemed to be struggling with something under their feet. They were sinking, and in a minute were up to their knees in the sand. Exclamations again burst from both of them. They could no longer pull their feet out of the sand, and down, down they went, till Hal was up to his armpits. A longing, agonizing look was on his face. I heard a piercing shriek. The other man had gone down, with only his outstretched hands visible, clutching hopelessly at space. A wail of agony escaped Hal.

"'Help! Help!' he cried. 'Oh, God! I am sinking! Albert! Albert! Marie! Marie!'"

"Then I awoke with a shiek and in a cold perspiration, and that was the last of my dream."

Andrea Lamont sat like one in a dream himself. He remained silent several minutes, and then, as if suddenly recollecting what he had just heard, asked:

"Did the men at the cabin offer to help him?"

"No, sir. On the contrary, I seemed to have heard a sardonic laugh come from one of them. Ugh! it was horrible!"

The merchant remained in a profound silence several minutes more. Albert Lamont sat still, and waited for him to speak.

"Would you know that place if you were to see it?" the merchant finally asked of the young man.

"Yes, sir. The whole scene was actually burned into my brain," he answered.

"Send for DeGive again," said the merchant. "Send for Antoine DeGive!" and he again rang the little silver bell that seemed to have a voice for Pierre alone.

"Send Ellis here," was all Pierre heard, and out he ran again.

Ellis came in and found the great merchant busy writing.

Like a well-trained servant he waited until the writing was finished.

"Here, Ellis," said Andrea Lamont, "give this note to the detective."

Ellis hastened back to the Central Detective Office and gave the note to Antoine DeGive, who appeared to be no little astonished at its contents.

"Tell him I will be with him in a half hour or so," he said to Ellis.

Ellis bowed and left.

Mr. Lamont was not in the least superstitious in regard to dreams. In fact he did not believe in the supernatural of Hal Percy's disappearance, and Albert Lamont's two dreams appeared very strange to him.

When Antoine DeGive made his appearance the second time that day in the merchant's office, the latter said to him:

"I sent for you, Mr. DeGive, to tell you something more I have just learned about my nephew."

"Mr. Percy, do you mean?"

"Yes. My other nephew, Albert Lamont, had a dream about him on the night he disappeared."

There was a look in the face of the detective that caused Andrea Lamont to stop and ask:

"But do you believe in dreams, Mr. DeGive?"

"I do—sometimes," was the reply.

"Well, I never did," continued the merchant, "but this one

is so very singular under the circumstances that I concluded you ought to be made acquainted with it," and he proceeded to relate the dream as Albert had told it to him.

Antoine DeGive seemed greatly interested, and said:

"I have great faith in such dreams. No living man can explain them. I have known persons to dream of occurrences as they took place a thousand miles away, and afterwards ascertained they actually occurred. Is Albert Lamont a cool, brave man, sir?"

"I have never seen his courage tested, but believe he is not devoid of true courage."

"Then I would like to have him accompany me on a trip down the river road."

"Ah! I am sure he will be glad to go, sir. I will call him at once." And tapping the little silver bell again, Pierre made his appearance.

"Send Mr. Albert Lamont here," said the merchant.

Albert promptly responded, and was introduced to the detective, who glanced at him from head to foot.

"Do you think you would know the places you saw in your dream," he asked, "were you to see them again?"

"Certainly I would," he answered, "for they are still vivid in my memory."

"Will you go with me down the river road in search of that hut in the swamp where you last saw your cousin?"

Albert was amazed.

He made no answer, but turned and looked at his uncle.

"You have my permission to go, Albert," said the merchant.

"Thanks! A thousand thanks, Uncle Andrea!" exclaimed Albert. "I will gladly go, and at any time."

"Be ready in an hour, then," said Antoine DeGive, "armed and well mounted. I shall be off by that time," and with that the detective left the office of the merchant.

CHAPTER III.

ON THE ROAD—THE SWAMPER—"THE HUT IN THE SWAMP!"

At the appointed time the two men again met in the office of Andrea Lamont. Each was armed to the teeth—a bowie-knife and brace of revolvers—and had good horses.

"Are you ready, Mr. Lamont," Antoine DeGive asked of the young man.

"Yes—ready to mount," answered Albert, the cousin of the missing Hal Percy.

"Come, then, we must be off, for I want to go about the same hour that Percy did. The moon will rise later, but she will shed as much light on the scene as four nights ago."

The two men mounted their horses and rode away, determined, if possible, to unravel the mystery of Hal Percy's fate.

When they had reached the outskirts of the city and started down the river road that was covered with a tropical growth, Antoine DeGive turned to his companion and asked:

"Did you ever shoot a man, Mr. Lamont?"

"No, sir, I never did. Why do you ask?"

"For information. You would not be afraid to do so, would you?"

"Not in the least, sir, if such a necessity was forced upon me."

"I am glad to hear you say that, for we may come up with such a necessity at any time in this search."

"Do you really think so?"

"Your dream certainly indicates foul play against your cousin. The same play will be turned against us if we succeed in tracing him out."

"That is to be expected, I suppose."

"Of course. I am an old hand at this business, and know how to deal with criminals. I make it a rule to expect them to commit murder, and, hence, never take any chances with them.

He who puts in the first shot generally comes off best. Now, if we come in contact with any strange or suspicious characters, we must watch and see that they do not get the first shot at us. Do you understand my meaning?"

"I think I do."

"Do you approve it?"

"Yes. I shall not be found wanting when the time comes for shooting."

"Very well. As I am the elder you will have to allow me to direct everything."

"Indeed, sir, I expected to do that. You are employed to unravel this mystery. I am only an assistant in the matter."

"Very well; we understand each other then. Now, we are to be simply visitors on our way to St. Armand's plantation."

"Well?"

"That is our destination. If we meet anybody before we get there our names are other than they are now."

"Yes. I am Job Jobson."

"And mine is Tom Hyler."

"That's arranged, then," remarked Albert Lamont, as they rode forward at a brisk pace.

Night came on, and the moon rose bright and full, shedding a silvery light over that tropical scene. On their right was the ever-rolling Mississippi, on whose bosom the moonbeams danced incessantly. On their left the live oaks, festooned with long, hanging moss, cast huge, weird shadows.

Now, look well about you, Jobson," said the detective, "and when you catch anything you recognize as having seen in your dream, let me know."

"I will keep a sharp lookout," answered Albert. "I am sure I will recognize everything if I see them."

Mile after mile was passed, and they were within a few miles of the St. Armand plantation. The detective noticed that Albert was gazing around him with an interest he had not before manifested. Suddenly Albert stopped his horse and gazed around him.

"On my soul!" he exclaimed. "I saw him right here with another man on horseback."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes; as sure as I am that we are here."

"Well, keep on and see what you can discover."

They pushed on, and Albert swore he recognized every tree and glimpse of the river beyond them.

"Ah! I see a light ahead!" he exclaimed.

"You said nothing about a light in your dream," remarked DeGive.

"No—I saw no light at all."

"I believe it is a small camp-fire," said DeGive, leaning forward and peering through the bushes.

So it proved to be.

Two wagons were drawn up by the road-side, the horses tethered and quietly feeding, whilst four men sat around the fire smoking pipes and talking.

The approach of our heroes caused the four men to turn their faces in their direction.

"Hello, strangers!" hailed DeGive, as he rode up. "Can you tell me how far it is to St. Armand's place?"

"Yas," answered one of the men, a rather rough-looking specimen. "I reckon yer'll find it a matter of seven miles from heah, stranger, I take it."

"So far as that?"

"I reckon as how it ain't a rod less, stranger. Gwine thar ter-night?"

"Yes—at least that's our destination. But I thought we were much nearer the end of our journey."

"Wal, it's a long ride yit, yer see," said the man, who was a tall, lank man of apparently forty years of age. "It's a mighty inconvenient place ter go arter midnight, anyhow."

"Why so?" DeGive asked.

"'Cause Jules St. Armand keeps blood-hounds, an' he's mighty quick ter shoot in the dark."

"You don't call such a night as this dark, do you?"

"Wal, no, not eggsackly," answered the man, expectorating half a gill of tobacco juice from his mouth. "It's all ther same, though, arter he's gone ter bed. Did yer come from the city?"

"Yes; we left town this afternoon," replied the detective.

"Any news up thar?"

"No—nothing stirring."

"Ever been down hyar afore?"

"Yes—on the steamers, but never by the road. Does this road lead direct to St. Armand's Landing?"

"Yas; it goes right thar when it's open, which it ain't now."

"Not open! What do you mean?"

"They're workin' on the levee below, an' took ther road whar it's close to ther river. Thar's a cut in a corner of the road, howsomedever, thet puts yer round all right. I'll show yer the cut ef yer wants me ter."

"Thanks, sir," replied DeGive. "If you will allow me to pay you for your trouble, I would be glad to avail myself of your services."

"Wal, I don't charge yer nothin', stranger."

"Of course not, but I will pay you all the same."

"Wal, we ain't quarrelin' about it," said the man, throwing his rifle over his shoulder and preparing to start.

He led off down the road, and our heroes followed on their horses.

"Do you live about here?" DeGive asked, as he rode close behind him.

"Yas; I live in ther swamp abit," and he made a gesture with his right hand toward the swamp that might have been interpreted to mean that he considered the whole place his home, instead of any particular locality therein.

"Why, I didn' know anybody lived in these swamps!" exclaimed DeGive, giving Albert Lamont a significant look. "I thought they were owned exclusively by frogs, snakes, and alligators."

"And owls," suggested Albert.

"Thar's lots o' people in thar," said the swamper.

"How do they live?"

Huntin' an' sellin' game, an' they don't pay no rent."

"Do you live in a house?"

"Gosh almighty, stranger! does yer think I live in a log like a coon? Yas, I lives in a house an' it's a good un, too."

"Oh! then there are dry spots in the swamp, where houses can be built?"

"Yas—islan's," remarked the swamper.

"Do the alligators and snakes trouble you any?"

"No, sir. We do the troublin'."

"Ah!" exclaimed Albert, looking around, "I remember seeing this scene before. I recollect it as vividly as if it were yesterday that I first saw it."

"B'en hyer afore, eh?" the swamper asked, with a sudden interest.

"Yes," replied Albert, who did not choose to tell him that he had been there in his dreams.

The swamper looked up at him, and Albert returned his gaze. The full light of the moon shone on the swamper's face, and Albert seemed startled as he looked at him.

He had seen that ugly face and gaunt form before somewhere. Yet he could not locate it to his satisfaction.

The swamper, as if satisfied with his inspection of the young man, turned and resumed his journey.

DeGive and Albert exchanged significant glances, but said nothing. They quietly followed him, and for the next half mile not a word was uttered by any one. All three were doing some hard thinking.

Suddenly the swamper turned into a small path that led from the main road directly into the swamp.

"Is this the cut you spoke of?" DeGive asked of the swamper.

"Yas. It leads around the place below," he answered.

The detective wondered how it was that no provision was made for wagons, as along that path one could not go. But he said nothing.

"Go ahead," he finally remarked.

The two horsemen followed. The heavy shadows cast by the trees, hung as they were with long pendant mossy festoons, rendered a close inspection rather difficult.

Yet they could see the tall, gaunt form of the swamper, as he led the way into the swamp, and managed to keep close beside, or rather behind him.

Owls hooted in the trees over their heads, and other sounds issued from the depths of the swamp that were neither pleasant to hear nor familiar to their ears. But they were brave men, armed to the teeth, and had a mission to perform that would admit of no shirking.

"I certainly would not make a choice of a residence in such a place as this," remarked DeGive, after a silence of several minutes.

The swamper made no reply, as if he thought the remark not addressed to him.

A minute or two later they came to an opening.

On a little knoll in the center of the clearing stood a cabin, or hut, and on three sides was a stretch of gray sand and water.

"Good gracious!" gasped Albert Lamont, almost losing his balance in the saddle. "The hut in the swamp!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE SWAMPER AND THE DUEL ON THE LEVEE.

The reader may imagine the swamper's surprise when he heard the exclamation that involuntarily burst from Albert Lamont's lips.

He looked up quickly, and asked:

"Bin hyer afore, eh?"

"I've seen yonder hut before," was Albert's reply.

"Ever bin in it?"

"No."

"Who lives there?" Antoine DeGive asked.

"I live thar."

"Well, I must say you've selected a queer place for a residence," remarked the detective.

"Have you any family?" Lamont asked.

"No; only me an' my two brothers live hyer."

"Where are your brothers to-night?"

"They was with me thar at the wagon camp."

"Why didn't they come with us?"

"Look hyer, stranger, what's the matter with yer? Ef yer don't like my style, I don't like your'n! Understan'?"

"Yes; I understand well enough," said DeGive, very coolly. "You speak plain enough. What's the matter with you? Don't you like our style? Who's saying anything about style, anyway? You offered to lead us through a cut to the main road, and here you've led us to a hut out in the swamp. I don't like your style. Do you understand that?"

DeGive cocked his revolver, and the sharp click! click! told the swamper that he had a man of nerve to deal with.

"Wal, I don't like your'n, stranger; so we're even, ain't we?"

"No!" hissed DeGive, presenting a cocked revolver at the swamper's head. "I have the drop on you. Turn round and lead us back to the road, or I'll fill your skin full of lead!"

The swamper was amazed.

He had his rifle on his shoulder, and any attempt to re-

move it from that position would be a signal for the detective to shoot.

"Wal, blast me ef you ain't the quarest critter I ever see!" he exclaimed. "Thar's the main road jist over thar in the rear of ther hut. We was gwine round ther hut an'——"

"Well, never mind that now," said DeGive, interrupting him. "Just lead us back the way we came, and then we'll be satisfied. Do you understand?"

"Yas—come on. Blast it, I won't be in sich a hurry ter help strangers through agin."

He turned and started back the way he came. DeGive followed close behind him, keeping his revolver leveled at his back all the time.

Albert Lamont kept his revolver in his hand ready for any emergency, though he could not understand why Antoine DeGive would not go into the hut and search for evidence of Hal Percy's fate.

When the swamper had gone probably half the distance, he gave a whistle that sounded rather significant.

"Do that again," hissed DeGive, "and I'll put a bullet through you!"

The swamper made no reply, but went on his way in silence.

Suddenly he emerged out into the main road again.

The full moon revealed a most diabolical expression on the face of the swamper.

"Hyer's yer road," he said, coming to a full halt, "and now I wants satisfaction, an' I'm gwine ter have it, stranger."

"Satisfaction for what?" DeGive demanded.

"Yer insults ter me."

"Oh! well, suppose I say I haven't any time to waste on you?"

"By gum, I'll make time, or give ole Eternity a corpse!"

"Do you want to fight me?"

"Yas—it's fight, stranger."

"Well, you have no right to it, but you shall have it. Where's your man?"

"We'll go back to ther camp an'——"

"No. I've had enough of your friends. I won't go back there," said DeGive.

"Then we'll have it right hyer, stranger."

"Very well," and the daring detective dismounted and tied his horse to a limb.

Albert did the same, and then all three moved out on the levee, near the muddy waters of the great river, where a flood of moonlight lit up the scene with a weird splendor.

"Step off ten paces, Albert," said DeGive to his young comrade.

Lamont did so.

The swamper stood leaning on his rifle, gazing out over the moonlit river, as if utterly indifferent as to what was going on around him.

"You can give the word, Al," said the detective, stepping promptly forward to his position.

The swamper moved to the other end of the line without uttering a word.

"You can fire between the words one and three," said Albert. "Are you ready?"

"Stop!" cried a gruff voice behind them, and all three turned and glared at two men who approached from the road.

Both our heroes instantly recognized them as men they had seen at the little wagon camp an hour before. They each had a rifle on their shoulders.

"Gwine ter fight, eh?" said one of the newcomers. "What's ther row?"

"There isn't much of a row," said Albert. "Your friend there challenged my friend, and——"

"What did he do, eh?"

The man's tone and manner was very offensive to the high-strung young cousin of Hal Percy. His face flushed up quickly, as he haughtily asked:

"What right have you to step in and ask questions, sir?"

"The right of a gentleman!" retorted the man.

"Are you really a gentleman or a swamper?" Albert sneeringly asked.

"Oh, Lord! Stranger, you must take that back or fight?"

"I will do neither until you answer my question," was Albert's reply.

"I am a gentleman!"

"Do you live in the swamp like a wild beast, or——"

"Ten thousand snakes! Do yer mean ter insult me?"

"Are you a swamper?" Albert demanded again.

"Here! Let me ask a question," said DeGive, suddenly breaking in.

"Wal, ax yer question."

"Do any of you want to fight? Do you understand that?"

"Yas—I'm spilin' for a fight."

"Then you shall all have a chance. One at a time. You all three belong to the same swamp. Just wait your turn, gentlemen, and you shall have your satisfaction."

That was the code of the Louisiana swamps, and not a word of objection was uttered.

"Now, Al, give the word and we'll get to work."

"Are you ready?"

"Ready!" responded both.

"Fire! One—two——"

"Crack!" both revolvers exploded simultaneously.

The swamper reeled backwards, staggered to the left, and then fell into the boiling Mississippi and disappeared from sight ere any one could assist.

"Hello!" exclaimed Albert Lamont. "What in thunder do you mean by knocking your man into the river? That isn't according to the code!"

"I am not responsible for what a man does after I pink him," responded DeGive. "Put the next man in position."

The other two swampers had rushed to the river bank, and were peering eagerly down into the rolling, boiling current for a glimpse of their comrade.

CHAPTER V.

THE TREACHEROUS SHOTS—THE LANDING.

Ten minutes passed, and still nothing was seen of the swamper.

"Gentlemen!" called DeGive, "my time is precious. You cannot find your friend. Even if you did, you could do him no good. My bullet entered his right eye and passed through his head. As well let the catfish bury him as do it yourselves. Who is the next man?"

The two swampers stood transfixed to the spot.

"How does he know where his bullet went?" flashed through their minds as they stared at him. "He must be a dead shot."

"Is it fight or not?" Albert asked, in very determined tones.

"I don't know as we've got anything agin yer," said one of the swampers, after a pause of several minutes.

"Oh, well, I thought you were spoiling for a fight," remarked Albert.

"Well, let's be off, then, Al," suggested DeGive; "but see here, gentlemen, you saw this thing. Was it fair?"

"Yas," both swampers responded.

"All right, then. Now, come, Al, we must be going."

Our heroes moved toward their horses, and kept an eye on the two swampers at the same time.

Just as they were about to mount one of the swampers came up to the detective and asked:

"Stranger, would yer mind tellin' us what it was all about?"

"Well, no, now that you ask in a civil way. Your friend undertook to lead us through a cut to the main road below, and carried us to a hut out in the swamp. I didn't like the way he acted, and asked him a question or two, at which he became offended. I drew my revolver, got the drop on him, and compelled him to lead us back to the road. He then demanded satisfaction, and got it. I hope he is satisfied."

"Maybe yer done wrong, stranger."

"Maybe I did, and maybe I didn't. If I did, I gave him satisfaction."

"Yas, that's so;" and the swamper looked up at the moon and then out over the great river. "What's yer name, stranger?"

"Excuse me, sir; I haven't got any name to-night."

The swamper again looked wistfully up at the moon, and then asked:

"Ain't ashamed of it, be yer?"

"No; but I am ashamed of this night's work. I don't care to have it known by my friends that I came out here on the levee and exchanged shots with a swamper."

The swamper gritted his teeth, but made no reply. The next moment DeGive put spurs to his horse and rode away, followed by Lamont.

They were not thirty yards away ere two whiplike cracks broke the stillness of the night air, and a bullet whistled close by the heads of the two men.

"The treacherous villains!" hissed DeGive, wheeling and charging on them.

They broke and dodged into the swamp. DeGive sent a couple of bullets flying after them, and that was the last he saw of them.

Riding back to where Lamont was waiting, he asked:

"Are you hurt?"

"No—are you?"

"No. That bullet winded my face, though."

"I heard one of them whistle close by my head. But come, let's get away from here as quick as possible. They might get another shot at us from the swamp."

They put spurs to their horses and dashed away at full speed. In ten minutes they were over a mile and a half from the spot. Then they slackened their speed.

"Tell me," said Lamont, "why you did not go into the hut?"

"Because I didn't care to cast everything on the hazard of one throw. We have found the hut. You recognized it. If Percy is dead we can do him no good. We cannot arrest one of them without evidence to convict. That we must obtain at all hazards. It's the strangest place I ever saw for a hut."

"Yes; and it stands precisely in the spot where I saw it in my dream. I even saw the very spot in the sand where Hal was going down when I awoke. I am sure I could point out the place and not miss it an inch. But what are you going to do now?"

"Go on to St. Armand's plantation and try to find out something about those swampers. The negroes about here must know something about them."

"But ain't you going to make any arrests?"

"Not until I get some proof of guilt on which to hold them."

"Can't you dig up the bodies and——"

"But who can say they were killed?"

"Wouldn't the fact of their being found there be proof enough?"

"Why, no. The jury would say that any man will perish in the quicksand, and that there is no proof that they died any other way."

"Ah! I am beginning to see the difficulty that lies in our way. We may never find any proof of their guilt."

"I will not say that. If they are in the business of making away with people in that way, we can catch up with them, with a little patience."

"I hope so."

"So do I."

"Have you much hope?"

"Yes—am full of it."

They rode another mile in silence.

"So you see how he lied?"

"Who?" Albert asked.

"That swamper. There are no obstructions in the road."

"That's so!"

"Of course. He intended to inveigle us into the hut, and there have us foully dealt with in some way."

"No doubt of it."

They rode on and came to the large white mansion of the aristocratic planter, Jules St. Armand. It stood like a great white castle under the silvery moonlight, surrounded by a luxuriant garden of tropical flowers and evergreens.

"Shall we disturb the repose of the family?" Albert asked.

"Are you acquainted with them?" DeGive asked.

"Yes. I know the father, mother and daughter."

"Very good. We'll call them up."

Just then several negroes came out of some cabins below, and came forward.

"Here we can ascertain if Mr. St. Armand is at home."

The negroes were surprised at seeing two white strangers on horseback before the gate.

But DeGive was a kindly man to the blacks. He spoke to them and said:

"We have come to see Mr. St. Armand on business. Is he at home?"

"No, sah. Massa comin' down on de boat, sah."

"When will the boat get here?"

"She's comin' now, sah. Doan't yer heah dat coughin' up de ribber?"

Our heroes then remembered that for several minutes they had heard the hoarse coughing of a steamer up the river. They now heard it very plainly, and knew that one was coming down the stream. The negroes were up to receive the master at the landing, and such freight as was to be put off there.

"We are ahead of the boat, Al," said the detective, who had adopted that familiar way of addressing his companion at his special request. "We can wait and see him when he lands."

"Yes—I see the headlight of the steamer now," Albert answered. "She'll be here in a half hour."

The steamer came up, and St. Armand was received with many pleasant greetings by his servants. He was a kindly master, and his slaves had a lively affection for him.

Albert Lamont was the first to grasp his hand when he landed.

"Hello, Lamont!" he exclaimed, in evident amazement at seeing the young man there at that early hour. "What in the name of——"

"Hush—sh!" cautioned Albert, "I will explain everything at another time. We came down the road. Here's DeGive, the detective," which information he gave in a whisper.

St. Armand grasped Antoine DeGive's hand and said:

"I am very glad to meet you, gentlemen. Sorry I did not

get here sooner. Here, Jim, take these gentlemen's horses and put them up. Give them the best attention."

"Yes, sah!" responded the darky addressed, instantly taking charge of the horses.

"Come, gentlemen," said the planter, "you can get a few hours' sleep before breakfast."

They followed him into the house, where a servant showed them into a spare room. Ten minutes later they were snugly in bed, courting the god of sleep.

It was eight o'clock when they awoke, having had about four or five hours of sleep.

The planter was up before them, and gave them a hearty reception.

Marie St. Armand, his daughter, as beautiful as a May morning, was well acquainted with Albert. She gave him a cordial greeting.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Lamont," she said, extending her hand to him. "We expected Mr. Percy, your cousin, several days ago, but he disappointed us."

"Yes, but you know how business will interfere sometimes with one's desires and——"

"Come, let's have breakfast," said the planter, leading the way into the dining-room.

CHAPTER VI.

THE NEGRO AND THE SWAMPERS.

The breakfast was soon dispatched, during which time no allusion to the business that brought the two visitors from the city was made. The conversation was general, and the mother and daughter were under the impression that they had come down on the steamer with St. Armand.

The meal finished, our heroes had an interview with the planter in his library. Then Albert Lamont related the circumstances of his remarkable dream, and his prompt recognition of the hut in the swamp and its surroundings. St. Armand was astounded at what he heard. The mention of the fatal duel on the levee caused him to exclaim:

"The infamous villains! They even ape the manners of gentlemen! They ought to be arrested and either locked up or sent out of the country!"

"So they ought to be, sir," said DeGive, "but they are citizens and cannot be interfered with, except by due process of law. What we must do now, is to get evidence of guilt, and on that convict them and apply the penalty."

"But how can you get evidence? They live in the swamp, and nothing but alligators or snakes can follow them to their haunts."

"We can find easy access to the one hut in question," said DeGive, "and I am of the opinion that we can find out enough in time to convict them of crime. Do you know anything about these swampers, Mr. St. Armand?"

"No, nothing whatever. I only know them by sight, as there is that about them that never fails to stamp them as swampers. I have a servant, however, who knows all about them. You can use him as much as you like."

"Ah!" exclaimed DeGive. "I see that we shall soon get on the track of these villains."

"But do you believe in that dream, sir?" the planter asked, suddenly turning on the detective.

"I do!" was the prompt reply. "Mr. Lamont has never been down the road before, yet he recognized the places he saw in his dream. His descriptions of them were accurate to a degree. But dreams are not evidence in a court of justice, you see. We have got to work up the case."

"Yes, yes; I understand. Anything I can do for you will be cheerfully done. Do you wish to see Jim?"

"Jim? Who is Jim?"

"My servant, of whom I spoke just now."

"Oh, yes. Let us see him."

The planter rang a little bell that was on the table.

A black wench appeared in answer to the ring.

"Tell Jim to come here," said the master, and the wench quickly disappeared.

Ten minutes later the man Jim appeared, with a scared look on his face. He was evidently laboring under a very strong mental excitement. His face was as black as coal, and his frame showed that he possessed tremendous physical strength.

"What's the matter, Jim?" the planter asked, noticing the excitement on the black face of the negro.

"What's you'se gwine ter do wid me, marsa?" and the black looked his master full in the face. "If you'se gwine fo' ter sell Jim, I'se gwine ter fro him in de ribber, sah!"

St. Armand burst into a loud, hearty laugh, and said:

"Jim, I'll never sell you. We were reared together. You saved my life once, and I'll never forget it. Who put that idea into your head?"

"Dat brack sassy nigger Jane done gone an' tole me you'se was er. sellin' Jim, sah. Golly, marsa, she skeered me mos' white—he, he, he!" and the relieved darky showed a row of ivory that seemed almost to extend from ear to ear.

"Well, tell Jane that she is to be the first one sold when I want to get rid of my servants."

"Yes, sah—he, he, he! I'll make dat sassy wench's wool grow straight arter dis, see if I doan't. What you'se want o' Jim, marsa?"

"Jim, these two gentlemen are friends of mine from New Orleans. They have come down here on business, which is to find out all they can about the men who live in the great swamp."

Jim gave a start, and glanced up uneasily at his master, a fact that did not escape the lynx-eyed DeGive. The broad grin on his ebon face disappeared, and an expression of distrust came over it.

"Dey is bad uns, marsa," he remarked, shaking his woolly head.

"Everybody knows that, Jim," assented his master, "but very few know how they live, what they do, and what kind of men they are. You know a great deal about them, and can give these gentlemen more points than any one I know. I am going to turn you over to them while they remain here. Tell them all you know, and I will be pleased with you; besides they will pay you handsome Christmas money, too."

"Yes," said DeGive, who was a shrewd judge of negro character. "We think there are some very bad men among them, Jim, and have been sent down here to find out something about them. Your master says you know a good deal about them."

"Yes, sah, I does. Bress de Lor! I wish I didn't know nuffin' about dem!" and a groan escaped the distressed darky, to the intense astonishment of his master.

"Why, Jim!" the planter exclaimed, "what's the matter? What are you groaning about?"

Jim grew more and more uneasy.

He seemed to have a great fear of something on his mind.

"Speak out, Jim," said his master. "I am your best friend always. No harm will come to you for anything you say about the swampers. I'll stand by you and back you up against every rascal in the swamp. Tell us what you know."

"I—I—doan't know nuffin, marsa," faltered Jim, his fear gaining on him every moment till great beads of perspiration stood out on his black forehead.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed St. Armand, in amazement, "Are you one of them, Jim?"

"No, marsa—no, marsa! De Lor' sabe me!" and the negro

dropped on his knees and looked pleadingly up at his master, who grew more and more astonished every moment.

"Tell me, Jim," St. Armand said, "are you afraid of the swampers?"

"Yes, marsa, I is—dat's er fac'."

"Oh, well, you need not be. Don't let that trouble you in the least. These gentlemen will never let a living soul know that you have said a word about the swampers."

"No—no, marsa, dey knows ebberyting. Dey is debbils. Ef nigger doan't say nuffin, dey doan't do nuffin."

"Ah! I understand it all now," said DeGive, quickly. "He thinks the swampers have supernatural powers to punish any one who tells anything against them."

"Yes, I reckon you are right," said the planter. "Jim knows all about them, but I was not aware of his fear of them;" and then turning to Jim again, he asked:

"Jim, you know I am an educated man; do you not?"

"Yes, sah; yer farder sent yer to college, sah."

"The swampers and you colored folks can't read or write, can you?"

"No, sah; we doan't know nuffin."

"That's just what I want to get at. Now, I have read all the books in the Bible and Testament, and I know that no man can see into the future. No swamper can do you any more harm than you can do to him. He is simply a man like you, and doesn't know any more than you do. He may try to make a fool nigger believe he can do something wonderful, but if the nigger knocks him in the head he will find that he is just like any other rascal. Hereafter, when a swamper fools with you, tell him to mind his own business. If he strikes you, knock him down and kick some sense into him. Now, tell me why you are afraid of the swampers, Jim."

"I'se afeard dey'll kotch me, marsa."

"Have they ever tried to catch you?"

"No, sah."

"Did you ever see them catch any one?"

"Yes, sah."

"You did?"

"Yes, sah."

"Was it a white man?"

"No, sah; brack man."

"What did they do to him?"

Jim shuddered as if convulsed with an ague.

"Speak out, Jim. God is more powerful than all the devils in the world, and He never lets a man be hurt for telling the truth. What did they do to him?"

"Stuck 'im in de groun', sah."

"Stuck him in the ground?"

"Yes, sah."

"What do you mean? How did they do it? Tell us all about it."

"Dey jes tuck 'im by de heels an' stood 'im on his head, sah, an' pushed 'im down in de groun', an' dat was de las' ob dat poor nigger, sah."

"Was it a wet, sandy place where they did that?" DeGive quickly asked.

"Yes, sah, it was dat."

"The quicksand!" gasped Lamont, springing to his feet.

CHAPTER VII.

A NEGRO'S SUPERSTITION—REVELATIONS.

The negro little knew what a flood of light he had thrown on the mystery that was involved in the search for the missing Hal Percy. The exclamation of Albert Lamont startled him. He knew nothing about quicksands, but was shrewd

enough to see that he had said something which he could not then see the meaning of.

"Did you ever go back to that place, Jim?" DeGive asked.

"No, sah."

"Would you know it again if you were to see it?"

"Yes, sah."

"Was it near a hut in the swamp?"

"De Lor' sabe us! Yes, sah!"

"Did you know the negro who was put in the ground?" St. Armand asked.

"Yes, sah. He wuz Dick Pelham, sah."

"Ah! And Pelham thinks Dick ran away."

"But he didn't run away, marsa."

"Of course not. I understand it all now. Do the swampers know that you saw them put Dick in the ground?"

"No, sah, dey doan't," and the black trembled from head to foot.

"Well, don't be uneasy. They will never know it. How did you happen to see them?"

"I wuz er huntin' raccoons in de swamp," said Jim, "and hyeerd dem swampers er tarkin', sah. I laid low in de bushes an' hyeerd 'em tell Dick dat dey was gwine fo' ter kotch ebbry nigger what wuz too sassy about dere, an' den dey tied er rope roun' his arms an' laid er plank ober de sand. Den dey walked on de plank and stuck 'im down in de sand, and he went down slow, like he wuz sinkin' in de mud, and dat wuz de last I see ob dat nigger."

"Would you know the swampers who did that?"

"No, sah. De moon was er shinin', but dat wuzn't light enuff ter see dere faces."

"Yes, I understand. But why are you afraid of them? Why did you think they can do you any harm?"

"'Cause dey kin trick er poor nigger, marsa."

"Nonsense, Jim. No man can do anything of the kind. Man is never given any powers of that kind. Only poor white trash and ignorant negroes believe in such nonsense. Now, what did you ever see a swamper do that you couldn't do?"

"De Lor' gorramitey, marsa!" exclaimed Jim. "I seed one ob dem ere swampers trick er raccoon clean down outen er big tree, suah!"

"Nonsense!"

"Afore de Lor, marsa, I seed dat," persisted Jim, with great earnestness.

"Tell us about it," suggested DeGive.

"Yes, tell us what you saw," assented his master.

"De coon wuz up in de tree, an' dat swamper commenced ter work to 'im. De coon looked down and growl kinder like es ef he wuz mad. But de swamper tole him ter come down, sah, an' dat coon come down, an' walked right up an' let de swamper take 'im up in his arms, an' go home wid him, sah."

St. Armand burst into a fit of uproarious laughter, and Lamont and the detective soon joined him.

"Dat's de Lor's trufe, marsa," said Jim, greatly abashed at the laughter of the three whites.

"I haven't a doubt in the world, Jim, but that you have told the simple truth. But tell me how it is that it never got through your thick head that it was a tame coon belonging to the swamper? Lord, what fools you niggers are!"

Jim scratched his head and looked sheepish.

The others laughed, and by degrees a broad grin spread over the black face, and his ivories came into view again.

"Afore de Lor', marsa, I didn't know dat wuz er tame coon!" he said, grinning, as if greatly relieved of his doubts and fears.

"Of course not. A white man can make a nigger believe the moon is made of green cheese."

"What is it made outer, marsa?" Jim asked.

St. Armand looked sharply at him for a moment, as if surprised at the question, and answered:

"No man knows, Jim. It was put up there to give us light by night, and we poor mortals can only look at it."

"Bress de Lor!" exclaimed the simple, superstitious black, with a fervency that again caused a roar of laughter.

They questioned the black for over an hour, and strove to drive all superstitious fear of the swampers out of his mind. They succeeded so far as to induce him to promise to go with them as a guide through the swamp, on condition that he be allowed to carry a good gun and a revolver. They were to pretend to be hunters in search of game, and were to be disguised.

"Dat Marsa Langham went huntin' wid de swampers like as ef he knowed 'em all de time," said Jim, incidentally.

"Who is Langham?" DeGive asked, turning to the planter with an inquiring look.

"Who do you mean, Jim?" his master asked. "Philip Langham?"

"Yes, sah—de man dat Missus Marie gib de sack ter."

A dark frown instantly came over the swarthy face of the planter.

"I didn't know he hunted in the swamp, Jim."

"Yes, sah. He went to de hut in de swamp, sah, an' hunted wid dem."

"You saw him there?"

"Yes, sah, wid my own eyes."

"Gentlemen," said St. Armand. "Philip Langham is a speculator on a large scale. He bought heavily of sugar and syrup from some of my neighbors. He made the acquaintance of my daughter, and paid very marked attention to her. She discouraged him all she could, but could not prevent him from declaring himself. She declined his offer, and he grew quite furious, I understood her to say. I now learn for the first time that he was on any kind of terms with the swampers."

"There is a deep mystery in all this, my dear sir," said DeGive, rising and pacing to and fro across the room. "Please tell your good man here to go and say nothing about what has passed here this morning."

"Do you hear that, Jim?" said the planter; "you are to say nothing to any one about what has been said here this morning."

"No, sah—no a word, sah."

"Very well—now go and wait till I send for you again."

Jim picked up his hat and bowed himself out of the room, feeling a new dignity resting upon him in having been consulted by his master and his visitors.

"There is a deeper mystery about this thing than appears on the surface," said DeGive. "I know Philip Langham well."

"You do?" and St. Armand gave a start of surprise.

"Yes, I know him well."

"What is he?"

"He is a desperate gambler and a man of most unprincipled character. He is capable of any villainy in carrying out his plans."

"Good Heavens! and he was an honored guest of my house."

"Mr. St. Armand, I am well acquainted with your wife and daughter," remarked Albert Lamont. "Would you object to my asking Miss St. Armand a few questions about Philip Langham?"

"Not in the least, sir. She is with her mother in the parlor. Seek her there."

Albert Lamont left the two men in the library and went in search of the beautiful Marie.

CHAPTER VIII.

MARIE ST. ARMAND'S SECRET.

Mother and daughter were seated near a window in the luxurious parlor, where young Lamont found them. They were gazing out at the magnificent flower garden in front of the stately mansion, and watching the movements of a pair of humming birds.

"Oh, have you come at last, Mr. Tardy?" was the greeting he received from Mrs. St. Armand the moment he entered the room. "You well knew we were dying to hear from our friends in the city, and yet you have kept us in suspense these two frightfully long hours."

"I beg a thousand pardons, Madame St. Armand," said the gallant young man, making one of his most profound bows to the two ladies. "Business of the gravest import demanded my attendance in the library. I have just made my excuse to monsieur in order to present myself before you."

"Ah, then, you deserve a pardon for your seeming neglect. You are forgiven. But pray tell us all the news. How are your aunt and cousins?"

"They are well, thanks, and as happy as angels."

"What a pretty compliment!" exclaimed Marie St. Armand. "Really, I must repeat that when I see them."

"Please don't," pleaded Albert, with an air of mock distress, "for then you will hear of even worse things said about you."

"About me! Why, who, in this wide, wide world has been complimenting me behind my back?"

"Alas! I am guilty of that sin. How true it is that one's sins will find him out."

Mother and daughter laughed merrily, and then the conversation drifted into a channel that the reader has little or no interest in.

At the end of a half hour Madame St. Armand arose and retired, leaving the young couple together in the parlor.

"Miss Marie," said Albert, as soon as her mother had left the room, "I am glad I have an opportunity to speak to you alone."

"Why, what's the matter, Mr. Lamont? Has anything happened? For several days past I have had a feeling of impending evil haunting me."

"I am at a loss to say what has happened, Miss Marie. There is a deep mystery about it which I am trying to clear up."

"Mr. Lamont," said Marie, in a husky tone of voice, whilst a death-like pallor swept over her beautiful face, "don't keep me in suspense. Tell me what has happened!" and the trembling, pleading look she gave him touched his heart.

"I will—I will!" he said, "but be composed. Don't get excited. My cousin, Hal Per——"

A half-suppressed shriek burst from the pallid lips of Marie St. Armand, and then she seemed on the point of swooning. Lamont sprang forward and caught her in his arms.

She recovered in another minute and looked up in his face. His eyes met hers.

"You have discovered my secret," she half whispered. "What must you think of me?"

"I think more of you than before," he replied. "The woman who does not love is not yet wholly and truly the being that her Creator intended she should be. Your secret is safe; but in its place I will put another. He loves you."

A bright, happy light flashed in her dark lustrous eyes, and her whole frame quivered with the intensity of her joyful emotions.

"I found out his secret by an accident," he added, "and I have no doubt he intended to declare himself four days ago. He left the city to reach here at midnight, to deliver some important papers to your father, which, by accident, had not been delivered to the steamer, as ordered. Since that time nothing has been heard of him."

Marie St. Armand pressed her hands over her heart, as if to still its wild throbbing, and sank down into a chair. Again that death-like pallor swept over her face, and again was Lamont alarmed lest she should swoon.

But Marie was a girl of remarkable will-power, and, by force of will, quickly recovered herself. Then she turned on him a look of such mental agony that it almost unmanned the young cousin of her adoration.

"Miss Marie!" he exclaimed, "be calm. I—I don't think the worst has happened. He may have been detained by some designing villains."

"But who could have any designs on such a good young man as Hal Percy?" she cried. "He was so kind to everybody, and——"

"There are a great many very bad people in the world, Miss Marie," said Lamont, interrupting her. "He may be held for a ransom."

"But who? Where could he be held?"

"In the great swamp, between here and the city, are many places where one could be held almost beyond the possibility of being found. There are men living there, too, who, if reputation is anything, are capable of any kind of crime. I have come to ask you a few questions, the answers to which may throw some light on the mystery."

"Me! Heavens! I wish I could, but alas! I know nothing. This has all fallen on me like a thunderbolt from heaven."

"You can at least answer my questions, can you not?"

"Yes—yes. Ask me what you will?"

"Thanks. Did Philip Langham propose to you?"

A crimson flush swept over her face for a moment—but only for a moment. Then she was calm and self-possessed again.

"Yes," she answered; "but ought I to say so?"

"Certainly, under the circumstances. You rejected his suit?"

"I did, for I did not, could not, love him. But what——"

"Please don't ask me any questions till I am through. What did he say when you declined his offer?"

"He was very much disappointed, and then urged his suit till I had to forbid the subject. Then he grew very angry and vowed that I should yet be his. I told him it was impossible—that my heart was already engaged. He demanded to know to whom, and I left the room. I never saw him again."

"Now one more question, Miss Marie. Did he know that my Cousin Hal had ever visited you?"

"Oh, yes. He had heard me speak of him often."

"That is enough. He is at the bottom of Cousin Hal's disappearance."

"Oh, mercy! Do you think so?"

"I do. I have made a discovery since breakfast in regard to him that will astonish you, Miss Marie."

"Indeed! Oh, tell me everything?"

"I will—since you have been so frank with me. Langham is well known to my friend DeGive, who, by the way, is a famous detective. He says that he is a desperate gambler and an unprincipled man."

Marie turned pale and shuddered.

"Then again," continued Lamont, "your father's negro, Jim, says he has often seen him hunting with the swampers, and staying at their huts in the swamp, as though on the most familiar terms with them. When I heard that I

at once suspected that he knew something of Cousin Hal's disappearance."

Marie looked out of the window with a far-away expression in her eyes. She was thinking over the last words uttered by Philip Langham on the evening she rejected his suit, when he swore fiercely that she should be his even if he lost his own soul in gaining her.

"Oh, it's all like a horrible dream," she said, shuddering from head to foot. "I cannot realize that it's all true. Oh, Hal, my heart's love! Where are you? Where are you?" and then, burying her face in her hands, she burst into a passionate fit of weeping.

CHAPTER IX.

HUNTERS IN THE SWAMP—THE QUICKSAND BY THE HUT.

Albert Lamont could not stand the tears of Marie St. Armand. He hastily brushed away the evidences of his own manly sympathy with her, and then darted out of the room.

When Marie looked up and gazed through her tears around the gorgeously furnished parlor, she was surprised to find herself alone. Springing up, she ran to the door, and found that Albert had rejoined her father and Antoine DeGive in the library.

"Oh, he surely will not tell them of my secret love for Hal Percy!" she murmured to herself.

The next moment, however, she went back to her seat at the window and sat down, in the implicit belief that Albert Lamont would not betray her secret—and he did not.

When Albert entered the library, the planter and detective both turned inquiring glances on him.

"You have seen her?" said the planter. "What does she say?"

"I told her that Hal Percy had mysteriously disappeared while on his way here from the city; that you had told us of Philip Langham's proposal to her; of Mr. DeGive's characterization of him, and then asked her to tell me what he had said to her when she rejected his suit. She says he grew very angry, and swore that she should be his, even if he lost his own soul in gaining her. So you see he is at the bottom of all this. He has hired those swampers to either capture or murder Hal Percy, in order to get him out of the way."

"By my soul, Lamont!" exclaimed Antoine DeGive, "you reason like an old detective."

"Do I reason this thing correctly?"

"I think you do."

"Then what is the course to pursue?"

"Disguise ourselves, and take Jim along as a guide to hunt through the swamp."

"Just what I was thinking myself."

"How shall we disguise?"

"Simply dye our skins to a Spanish color, gentlemen," said St. Armand. "No one will know you then, and I've got some of the liquid for that purpose, which I bought a year ago when I contemplated a similar use for it."

"Ah, how fortunate that is," said the detective. "And you have guns, too, have you not?"

"A dozen or more."

"Very good. Now, to-morrow we will start out. Get Jim to get himself ready to go with us as guide."

"He is subject to your order. Talk with him as freely as you please."

During the day DeGive let Jim more into the secret of his presence there, and talked him into a perfect willingness to lead anywhere he desired to go in the swamp.

Then they went to work applying the lotion to their hands

and faces. It changed them to the complexion of Spaniards, dark and swarthy.

Early the next morning they gave Jim a rifle, and each carried one themselves, and set out on foot to hunt through the swamp.

They walked nearly six miles ere reaching the vicinity of the hut in the swamp. Then they commenced hunting in good earnest. Their frequent shots caused two of the swamper to put in an appearance to see who they were. They instantly recognized Jim as belonging to Jules St. Armand.

"Hello, strangers!" cried one of them. "What luck?"

"Very little game so far," replied DeGive. "But our guide there says we will have to go deeper into the swamp before we can hope to find much that's worth shooting."

"He's right, stranger," said the swamper; "the best game don't come out hyer an' wait for ter be shot."

"Then the swamp is the best place?"

"In course it is."

"You know all about this swamp, do you?"

"Yas; I'd say so ef I wuz you."

"Do you live about here?"

"Yas; we live hyer in ther swamp."

"Ah, I know, then, that you know just where the best gunning is to be had."

"Yas, I allers know whar ter go fur turkey an' deer an' b'ar."

"What! Are there any bears in this swamp?"

"Plenty on 'em," was the reply.

"Well, we would like nothing better than to come across one or two of them," remarked DeGive.

"Ever shoot a b'ar, stranger?"

"No; never met a wild bear in my life," was the reply.

"Live in town, eh?"

"Yes; we live in Havana."

"Oh! Spaniards, eh?"

"Yes—Cubans, rather."

"Speak Spanish?"

"Of course we do."

"Wal, yer kin find b'ar out in thar, an' if ye like we'll go with yer."

"Certainly. Glad to have you go."

"Come by ther house till we get our b'ar-guns, and we'll show yer how ter hunt b'ar."

"All right. Lead the way."

The swamper led the way toward the hut in the swamp, much to the disgust of Jim, who had not altogether shaken off his superstitious fears in regard to them.

DeGive gave Lamont and Jim a significant glance, and followed close at their heels. He and Jim did likewise, and in a little while they came in sight of the hut—but in the rear of it. On that side there was no sand visible. Neither was there a thin sheet of water, as on the sand on the other three sides of the clearing.

"You have selected a nice little island for your home," remarked DeGive, looking around him as a stranger naturally would. "You must have a visit from the bears occasionally, do you not?"

"Yas. One come up ter ther door last week an' poked his nose in. Bill thar gave him a bullet in his eye, an' ended his days right thar. Stranger, that b'ar weighed nigh onto four hundred poun's."

"What did you do with him?"

"Sold 'im—meat, skin, an' claws. We have ter have powder an' lead, yer see, an' some other things, 'cause no swamper ain't rich, nohow."

They reached the hut and entered it. There they found a double set of rooms, very frugally furnished, with two iron

chests that seemed strangely out of place in a hut in a swamp.

DeGive and Lamont used their eyes to take in everything as quickly as they could. Jim sat down on the threshold and quietly waited for the others to move.

"We've got some mighty good ole corn-juice hyer, strangers," said one of the swamper, producing a jug and withdrawing a corn-cob stopper from its mouth. "Take a pull at it, and it'll keep ther miasmer off'n yer."

"Many thanks, sir," said DeGive. "But I never drink any kind of liquor."

"Eh! A Spaniard, an' don't drink any liquor."

"Yes, sir. I never drink any liquor."

"Wal, blast me ef yer ain't ther first Spaniard as I ever see who wouldn't drink. Mebbe t'other one will."

"No, sir," said Al, "I never drink."

"Gosh Almighty!" and the swamper looked completely nonplused for a moment.

"Wal," said the other one, "ef they don't, I does!" and with that he took up a black bottle that stood on a shelf near his head and took a long drink from it.

"Now come on!" said he. "We're ready fur ther b'ars!"

He led the way out through the other door and started toward the sandy place near the edge of the bushes. When he reached it he stopped and motioned to DeGive and Al to go across.

"Why go through that water?" DeGive asked. "I'll walk around."

"Pshaw! It's only an inch deep," said the swamper.

The detective looked the swamper in the eyes, and cautiously reached for his faithful revolver.

CHAPTER X.

THE NEWCOMER—STRATEGY—OVER THE QUICKSAND BED.

For a moment or two the two men glared at each other as though a deep suspicion existed in their minds.

DeGive was master of himself, and did not let the expression of his face reveal the thoughts of his mind. He was more on the alert, however, to keep the swamper from getting the drop on him than to avoid revealing his suspicions.

"I am not afraid of a little water," he said, after a pause, "but your politeness in stepping back for me to lead where I have never been before, constrains me to insist on your keeping the lead. Go ahead and I will follow you."

"Yas, come on. We'll go round ther water," remarked the swamper, turning to lead off to the left of the sandy marsh.

"Gentlemen!" called a voice in the bushes on the opposite side of the water, "the water is not over an inch or two in depth, as I will show you," and the next moment a tall, dark, handsome man, carrying a double-barreled shotgun in his right hand, ran lightly across and joined the party.

DeGive instantly recognized him as Philip Langham, the New Orleans gambler. Jim also recognized him as the late guest of his master. Langham himself did not know Jim from any other slave on the St. Armand plantation, nor did he penetrate the dark-skinned disguise of the famous detective.

"I do not question the depth of the water, sir," said DeGive in his blandest tones, "but the wisdom of going through it unnecessary. I have an insuperable objection to doing so."

"Ah, yes; I have seen men who felt and believed as you do. Every man has some equally strong feelings on other points. As for myself, I never dodge a stream unless it is too deep for me. On the other hand, I do object to stepping over a live frog," and he indulged in a quiet chuckle, as he mentioned his little bit of superstition. Then, as if conscious that he was talking to strangers, he said:

"But excuse me, gentlemen; I forgot that we are strangers. My name is Philip Hynes, of New Orleans. I often run down here for a week's shooting with these sturdy denizens of the great swamp," and he made a profound bow to our heroes, who promptly returned it.

"Very glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Hynes," replied DeGive. "My name is Hyler, and this is my friend, Don Lemada."

Lamont bowed his acknowledgment of the introduction. He did not even suspect the identity of the newcomer.

"Very happy to meet you, gentlemen," said Hynes. "Do you reside in the city?"

"We live in Havana," answered DeGive, "and have been stopping with friends in the city. At present we are enjoying the hospitality of Jules St. Armand, whose beautiful plantation lies a few miles below here."

At the mention of Jules St. Armand's name Hynes gave a start, and quickly glanced around at Jim. That individual was gazing placidly at the antics of a squirrel in a tree a little distance from the clearing.

From the negro he turned to the swampers, with whom he exchanged significant glances. Then turning to our hero again he remarked:

"This is a fine morning for game. Did you find any on your way up from St. Armand's?"

"Only small game, as we kept to the road. St. Armand advised us to go to the swamp, and sent one of his men with us as a guide."

"He was right. The best gunning is in the swamp. The negro knows all about the swamp, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes. I guess he does."

"I hope you will allow me to accompany you to-day?"

"With the greatest pleasure, sir. Very glad to have you go."

"Have you anything to drink in the hut, Meacham?" Hynes asked of one of the swampers.

"Yas—thar's suthin' in the jug yit," was the reply. "But Mr. Hyler an' his friend won't drink."

"Ah! Is that so? Then you will excuse me a few moments, gentlemen, till I take a pull at that jug. My experience of the miasma in these swamps warns me that there is safety in strong drink."

"Certainly, sir. We will both excuse and wait for you."

Hynes and one of the swampers went back to the hut, leaving the other one with our heroes. But a minute or two later Meacham called from the hut:

"Say, Bill, whar's that jug?"

Bill, without uttering a word, turned and strode up to the hut, and disappeared within.

"Al Lamont," whispered DeGive, "that newcomer is Philip Langham."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Al in low tones; "is that so?"

"Yes. Do you know him, Jim?"

"Yes, marsa—dat's 'im suah," answered the black.

"We are three and three. We must keep our eyes on them, no matter what kind of game springs up, so as not to let them get a chance to give us a bullet. Jim, you keep your eye on Langham—follow him wherever he goes. I'll take Meacham, and you, Al, take Bill. If they separate, let each follow his man, and at the first moment of treachery, shoot him down. They may try to get away from us and shoot us behind our backs. Keep 'em in sight always. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sah!" was Jim's prompt response, not afraid of even the devil now that he had a gun in his hands.

"I know that you do, Al. We must not let 'em think we suspect anything."

"But, marsa," said Jim, "dat Marsa Hynes done gone an' run ober dat sand."

"So he did, Jim, and so can you or any one else. But if you try to walk over it you are lost. That's the nature of quicksand. Again, if you find yourself sinking in a quicksand, lie down and crawl out. If you remain on your feet, or long in one place, you will go down. If they run across it when they come back, we must do the same. I will go first."

"De Lor' sabe us!" groaned Jim.

"Don't fear to follow me, Jim," said DeGive. "Where one man can go another can follow. Here they come now."

Hynes and Meacham and Bill came out of the hut together, and made their way down to the spot where our two heroes were waiting for them.

Hynes was wiping his lips with a silk pocket-handkerchief.

"Ah! you missed some fine old whisky, gentlemen," he said, as he came up. "I never tasted better in all my life. These fellows in the swamps about here know good whisky when they see it."

"Well, not knowing good whisky from bad," remarked DeGive, "I think it best not to touch it. The result is I am in no danger of getting hold of any adulterated stuff. Are you ready for the hunt?"

"Yes. We are off now."

Meacham, Bill, and Hynes looked knowingly at each other for a moment, and then shouldered their guns and deliberately ran across the sandy marsh. On the other side they stopped, and turned around, saying:

"Come on!"

"Come ahead, Don Lemada," said DeGive, and then he, Lamont, and Jim ran nimbly across, to the supreme astonishment of Hynes and the swampers.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE SWAMP—THE SWAMPERS SURPRISED.

To say that the swampers were surprised would be but a mild expression.

They looked perfectly blank for a moment, and glared at each other like men in a dream.

"If you are determined to wade through water just for the pleasure of doing so," said Hyler, as we will now call the detective for a while, "we can wade as far and as deep as any man. We enjoyed it better, however, when we were boys and ran barefooted about the streets."

Hynes only laughed.

"We wanted to see if you were really afraid of a little mud and water," he said, "for if you were, we would be sure that you could not do much at hunting in a swamp."

"Oh, you were merely trying us, were you? Well, I think I could apply a test that would make any one of you fellows back down."

"By gum!" exclaimed Meacham, "tell us what it is. I ain't one of ther backin' down kind, stranger."

Hyler took an apple, of which he had several in his pocket, and said to Al:

"Don Lemada, step this way a moment, please."

Al did so.

"I am a dead shot. Place this on your head, and I will shoot it off. It may prevent them from attempting any treacherous game with us. You will be safe. Will you do it?"

Al was dismayed for a moment.

But he saw a look of calm confidence in DeGive's eyes.

"Yes, I'll do it," he said, and then, taking off his hat, he placed the apple on the top of his head.

Hyler stepped off ten paces, and wheeled and fired at it with his revolver very quickly.

The apple fell to the ground.

The three men ran forward to pick it up.

Hynes secured it.

The bullet had passed through the center of it.

"De Lor' Gorramitey!" gasped Jim, rolling up the whites of his eyes.

"Can you stand that test, Mr. Meacham?" Tyler coolly asked of the swamper.

"No!" was the prompt reply.

"I can!" said Hynes, coolly placing the same apple on his head. "Try me."

"Ah! You know my skill now. Here, Meacham, you shoot at it."

"Ten thousand devils—no!" exclaimed Hynes, snatching the apple from its perch.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Hyler, "and yet you wanted to test us! Really, sir, your nerves are not equal to your assurance."

An angry flash came into the gambler's eyes for a moment, but he saw that he was dealing with a very dangerous man, and so he kept his temper under control.

"It isn't every man who is a William Tell, sir," he remarked.

"Quite right, sir. Don Lemada is quite my equal with the revolver."

Hynes and the swampers looked askance at each other, and Hyler went on:

"Because we did not wish to wade through a little water is no sign that we are not able to go where any other man can. We can swim, dive, run, climb, wrestle, or perform any other feat. You see our physical education was not neglected. Shall we go on with the hunt now?"

"Yes," replied Hynes. "We can go into the depths of the swamp now. Lead on, Meacham. We are more than a match for all the bears in Louisiana, I think. You don't know how much confidence you have given us, Mr. Hyler."

"I am glad to hear it. There is nothing like confidence in one's companions on a hunt. I remember once of hunting with two men in Cuba. They were regular blackleg gamblers of Santiago, but I did not know them at the time. I wore an immense diamond in my shirt bosom. They determined to kill me and possess themselves of the stone. I saw significant glances pass between them, and was on my guard. At a time when they thought it safe to attack me, they wheeled on me with their guns. Quick as they were I emptied two barrels of my revolver at them, and their guns dropped from their grasps. Their right arms were broken!"

"De Lor' Gorramitey!" exclaimed Jim, gazing at DeGive with unfeigned amazement pictured on his black face.

"I must say you were very fortunate in that case," remarked Hynes.

"Yes, I make it a rule to be on my guard always," he returned. "Eternal vigilance is often the price of a life as well as liberty."

The party proceeded some distance, when they were fortunate enough to come across a couple of deer. Meacham and Don Lemada each brought down one. The others did not get a shot. It so happened that Al's shot was a very remarkable one—in fact, an accident. The buck was running away from him direct, and made a spring over some bushes. As he rolled in the air Al fired. The bullet penetrated the back of his head, causing instant death.

"That was a splendid shot!" exclaimed Hynes, who was a witness to it.

"Yes, a very good shot," remarked Hyler. "The don is even a better shot than I."

Soon after the capture of the two deer, Hynes proposed that the party divide into two parties, and that each make a circuit to meet at a point a half mile further on.

"One party will thus drive the game on the other," he said, "and I think we will have much better luck."

"Yes," assented Hyler. "I think that a very good idea."

The party then assembled, and prepared to divide as suggested.

"Jim is a good guide," remarked Hynes, "and so is Meacham. Bill and I will follow Meacham and——"

"Oh, no—beg your pardon. Mr. Meacham and Bill—I don't know your other name, sir—live in the swamp. They know more about it than Jim does. Let Meacham go with the don, and—and——"

"Nesbitt—Bill Nesbitt," said the other swamper.

"Thank you; Mr. Nesbitt and Jim, and you and I, Mr. Hynes. Then we will be about evenly divided. Don't you think so, Don Lemada?"

"Yes—that's the best plan," responded Al Lamont.

Hynes was completely floored.

A look of momentary disgust, if not supreme disappointment, passed over his face. But he quickly repossessed himself, and said:

"Yes—that would probably be the best way."

"Certainly it would. It would preclude the possibility of accidents."

"Accidents?" exclaimed Hynes, glancing furtively at Hyler. "What kind of accidents could happen to any one here?"

"Many kinds, such as getting lost or being mired up in a bog, or——"

"Oh, yes, of course," assented Hynes, interrupting him. "I never thought of that. You and I will go together, then."

"Yes. Will you go with Mr. Nesbitt, Jim?"

"Yes, sah," replied Jim.

"And you with Mr. Meacham, Don Lemada?"

"With the greatest pleasure," was Al's reply, with a polite bow.

Meacham and Nesbitt seemed worried about something, and tried to get a chance to whisper something in Hynes' ear. But Hyler kept himself so busy around him that the opportunity was not afforded them. They were separated without having another word together in private.

"Ah," thought the wily detective, as he saw the discontented looks of the two swampers, "it was a shrewd dodge, but wouldn't work. Having failed with the quicksand, you were to separate, going in a body together and lay for us in the swamp and shoot us down like dogs. Shooting that apple has made you do some pretty tall thinking, my precious villains. We'll see what we shall see. Al and Jim will be a match for the others, and I am not afraid of you, Phil Langham, sharp as you think you are."

CHAPTER XII.

THE SWAMPER AND THE NEGRO.

As the party separated, black Jim turned and followed Bill Nesbitt with a docility that puzzled Albert Lamont.

The latter desired very much to say a few words to him, in order to put him on his guard against the wily swamper.

"But, pshaw!" he muttered to himself, as he saw Jim follow the swamper, "he has heard enough to put him on his guard. He is shrewd if he is a black man."

When they were out of sight and hearing of the others Nesbitt turned on Jim and suddenly asked:

"Where are them two men from?"

"Dunno, sah," said Jim.

"Ever see 'em before?"

"No, sah, nebber did."

"How long have they been at your master's house?"

"Free days, sah," answered Jim, thinking it best to do some lying.

"Sure of that?"

"Yes, sah, suah."

"What do they want thar?"

"Dunno, sah."

"What did yer bring 'em hyer for?"

"Marsa tole me, sah, ter fotch 'em whar de game wuz, sah."

Nesbitt glared savagely at him, and Jim clutched his rifle for instant action. But the swamper never dreamed that the negro would dare defend himself, even though abundantly able to do so.

"Jim, do you know ther swampers?" he suddenly asked.

"I knows some ob dem, sah."

"Purty bad uns, eh?"

"No, sah. I dunno no bad uns, sah."

"Pshaw! Don't yer know they dance with ghosts every night in this 'ere old swamp?"

"No, sah."

"That they do."

"Yes, sah, ef yer say so."

"I do say so. Ain't yer afraid of ghosts?"

"No, sah; not when I'se got dis heah gun wid me."

"Would yer shoot a ghost, Jim?"

"Yes, sah."

"What did yer marster give you a gun for?"

"Ter hunt wid, sah."

The swamper saw that the negro was not to be scared as long as he had the gun in his hand. He resolved to get it away from him, and then put a bullet through his head. To sink the body in some of the many lagoons in the swamp and report him as lost, would not be a difficult thing for him to do, he thought.

Slyly removing the cap from the tube of his rifle, he offered to exchange guns with Jim, just to try it.

"No, sah; dis heah is marsa's gun," said Jim, with a determined shake of the head.

"What! Yer won't let me look at it?" demanded the swamper in an angry tone of voice.

"Yer kin look at it, sah, but I'se gwine ter hol' on ter her."

"Wal, I'm ducked ef yer ain't a black fool!"

"Yas, sah, I is. Niggers is all fools, sah. Dey cain't help it, sah. Dey is born dat way."

"That's so, by gum," and the swamper slyly replaced the percussion cap on the gun again. "Yer may goahead, Jim. Yer know ther swamp as much as I do."

"No, sah. Niggers ain't got no call ter go afore de white folks. I'se gwine ter foller yer, Marse Nesbitt."

The swamper again cast furtive glances at the black, and saw there an expression of deep suspicion. He instantly surmised that the suspicion grew out of some knowledge of a criminal character. To turn and attempt to shoot him down while the black was on the alert was not so easy to do. The negro might shoot him down, which would not be so pleasant.

Suddenly a deer starts up before them.

"There! shoot 'im!" cried Nesbitt.

But Jim remained unmoved.

The splendid game did not tempt him to discharge his gun, and thus be left at the mercy of the swamper.

The deer bounded away and escaped.

"Blast yer black hide!" gasped the swamper. "Yer let 'im git away!"

"It wasn't me, marsa," said Jim. "Wha' fo' yer let him go?"

"Why didn't yer fire?"

"Nigger shoot fust? Oh, no, marsa. Nigger got mo' sense'n dat. White folks hab all de fun."

"What have yer got a gun for, I'd like ter know?" angrily demanded the swamper.

"Nigger hunt wid white folks, but don't shoot till de white folks shoot."

Nesbitt was stumped completely.

He waited and watched, but every time he looked at Jim he found the darky's eyes riveted on him.

There was no chance to take him unawares. Jim was all eyes and ears.

They pushed their way through the swamp for some distance without uttering a word. All sorts of game sprang up around them, of which no notice was taken.

Suddenly, however, a huge black bear sprang up from a snug bed of leaves, and made a rush at Nesbitt.

The swamper was a cool villain, and had often encountered bears before. But in this instance the beast was on him ere he could bring his rifle to bear. The gun was knocked from his hands, and the next moment he was inclosed in the powerful arms of Bruin.

"Ugh—oh!" groaned the swamper, perfectly helpless in the brute's ferocious hug. "Oh, Lord! Ugh—ah! Shoot—'im—Jim!"

Jim rushed up and pointed the muzzle of his gun at the bear's head. At the moment, however, the huge brute danced around out of the way, and gave the swamper another emphatic hug.

"Ugh! Oh—Lord—whoop!" and a wild, despairing cry escaped the swamper.

Jim thought he heard his bones crack in the terrible hug.

Quickly placing the muzzle at the bear's head a second time, he pulled the trigger, and Bruin and the swamper rolled over on the ground together.

With an angry growl the bear almost crushed Nesbitt's life out of him in his death agonies.

But the swamper rose to his feet and staggered toward his rifle, which was still lying where it fell.

He stooped and picked it up.

Jim was reloading his rifle.

Nesbitt glanced quickly at him, and then leveled his gun at his head.

CHAPTER XIII.

JIM'S FIGHT FOR LIFE—THE MYSTERY.

When Jim saw the swamper aim his rifle at him, he had a bullet rammed about half way home in his own gun.

He had no time to run.

No time to dodge.

Nor could he hope to save himself by yelling.

Nothing but a terribly spasmodic exertion could save him. Without withdrawing the ramrod from his gun he snatched up his weapon and pitched it at him.

He did not even have time to throw it—to raise it above his head to gain an impetus—but had to pitch it as though it was red-hot to his touch.

As he pitched it he yelled:

"You dar!"

He yelled it with a terrible emphasis.

The yell and the heavy steel barrel of the rifle struck Bill Nesbitt about the same instant.

The weapon struck him in the mouth, crushing lips and yellow teeth together.

As he went down like a log, his bullet went up through the trees, and Jim's life was saved.

"Bress de Lor!" gasped the negro, drawing a long breath of relief, taking up his rifle and finishing the reloading of it.

Bill Nesbitt was stunned by the blow.

He lay like a dead man for two or three minutes, the blood filling his mouth and throat almost to suffocation.

Then he turned on his side, spat out several broken teeth and a quantity of blood.

He was deathly sick, and felt all broke up. The hugs and the blow were too much for him, and, strong man though he was, he sank back into a death-like faint.

Jim glared at him with profound astonishment.

"De Lor' Gorramitey!" he exclaimed, "dat 'ere swamper is done gone an' guv up de ghost. Dat b'ar wuz too much fo' him, suah. I'se gwine fo' ter tell Marse Hyler 'bout dat," and not waiting to see anything more, he started off through the swamp, in search of the other parties.

Being well acquainted with the swamp, the negro lost no time in making his way to a point where he knew he would be sure of meeting the other parties. Arriving at the spot, he sat down under an immense live-oak, to await their coming. By and by he heard them, and in a few minutes he was with them.

"Hello, Jim!" exclaimed Hyler, on seeing the darky all alone. "Where is Nesbitt?"

"Dead, sah."

"Dead!" gasped Hynes, turning deathly pale.

"Dead!" exclaimed Hyler, convinced that Jim had shot him. "How did it happen, Jim?"

"De b'ar done it, sah."

"A bear! Did a bear kill him?"

"Yes, sah—dat's er fac'."

Hynes and Hyler glared at each other in blank amazement.

They had heard two shots at several minutes' interval, and thought one of the three parties had struck game.

"Where is he now?" Hyler asked, turning again to Jim.

"Dey is bofe dere on de ground," said the black.

"Both! What do you mean by 'both'?"

"De b'ar an' Marse Nesbitt."

"Oh—did he kill the bear?"

"No, sah. De b'ar wuz er kilin' ob him, sah, an' I killed de b'ar."

"Oh, the bear was hugging him," said Hyler, "when you shot the bear. Was that the way of it?"

"Yes, sah, dat wuz de way."

"Where is the place?" Hynes asked. "Lead the way, and let's see about this thing. I've known panthers to kill a swamper by dropping down on them from a tree. Never heard of a bear doing so."

Jim gave Hyler a significant look, and then led the way through the swamp, toward the spot where he had left the bear and Nesbitt lying on the ground. The detective was quite satisfied in his own mind that Jim had something to do with the death of the swamper, and was prepared to defend him against the wrath and vengeance of the other swampers. He saw that Hynes was quite pale, and had a look of desperation in his eyes.

When they reached the spot they found the bear lying where he had fallen, but Nesbitt was missing.

Jim glared around like one in a terrible nightmare.

He rubbed his eyes and looked again.

"De Lor' sabe us!" he gasped. "De debil done got 'im an' gone off wid 'im, suah!"

"Where did you leave him?" Hynes asked.

"Right down dar, sah!" and Jim pointed to the spot where he had last seen Nesbitt. "He wuz er lyin' dar an' spittin' blood, sah; an' den he role ober like er dead un, sah. Oh, Lor' sabe us! De debil is in dis heah swamp, suah!"

Hynes and Hyler went forward and examined the spot

where Nesbitt had been lying, and found there a quantity of blood and four broken teeth.

"Ah!" exclaimed Hyler, "I understand the whole thing now. Jim thought he was dead, when he had only fainted. On finding himself alone when he came to, Mr. Nesbitt must have gone back to the hut. I don't think he is dead, by any means."

"I am not so sure of that," remarked Hynes.

"What is your theory, sir?"

"I—I—have no theory," was the hesitating reply. "Only I am not sure that he is up again. That is a big bear—an ugly customer."

"Yes, very," assented Hyler. "But what shall we do about Nesbitt? Jim says he left him lying here. We have corroborative evidence of his truth in this blood and these broken teeth. But he is not here now. Where is he? Shall we hunt for him?"

"I hardly know what to say. Meacham ought to be here. He might know what is best to be done."

"Jim, would you mind going to the place where you met us, and tell the others to come here?"

Jim made no answer other than to dart away in the bushes and hasten back to the place mentioned.

Hynes and Hyler remained near the dead bear, conversing on the accident which had thus interfered with the day's hunting.

In a half hour Jim returned, accompanied by Meacham and Don Lemada.

"Jim says Nesbitt is missing," said Al, as soon as they came up. "What is it, anyhow?"

"That's what we wish to find out," replied Hyler. "We thought it best to send for you two, and consult over what was best to be done."

Meacham got all the particulars, and then came to the same conclusion that Hyler had—that Nesbitt had come to and attempted to get back home alone.

"We had all better go back," he suggested, "and try to find out all about this thing."

"Jim!" called Hyler, "skin the bear and cut the hams."

"Yes, sah," and the darky went to work like an old hunter to divest the dead bear of his skin. This done, Meacham cut the hams, and then the party were ready to return to the hut.

On the way back Hyler and Don Lemada never let the swamper and Hynes have even a whispered conversation together. Nor did they indulge in any themselves. They knew upon what business they had come to the swamp, and that was never once lost sight of.

At last they reached the hut.

"Come in," said Meacham, turning to Hyler and Don Lemada.

"Thanks, sir. We will accept your kind hospitality for a little while," said Hyler, following Hynes into the hut.

"He ain't hyer," said Meacham, looking around and into the other room.

"No," said Hynes, "he isn't here, and we'll never see him again."

"I am quite sure that we will," said Hyler.

"Why so?" Hynes asked.

"Because he is not dead."

"How do you know that?"

"Jim says he left him lying there, and——"

"But he says he was dead."

"Thought him dead," added Hyler. "But that he was not dead we know from the fact that he was not there when we returned."

"May he not have been thrown into the lagoons near there?"

"By whom?"

"Ah! That's the question. Bill Nesbitt was not the man to let a bear get the best of him."

"Do you suspect foul play?"

"I do," and as he spoke the gambler looked the detective full in the face.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SECRETS OF THE HUT.

To say that Hyler was surprised at Hynes' words would be but a mild way of expressing it. He was amazed.

"Only the negro was with him," he remarked, after a pause. "Do you suspect him?"

"I do!"

"Then we will have him arrested, and——"

"By no means, my friend," said Hynes, very quickly. "Suspicion is no proof. A case could not be made out against him, as you well know. Have a drink of this fine brandy. You will find it very——"

"Excuse me, sir, but I never drink any liquors."

"Ah, I forgot," and he set the bottle aside without taking any of it himself.

During the short conversation within Jim remained seated on the doorstep, with his gun lying across his lap. He did not hear Hynes when he charged him with having made away with Nesbitt. He never took his eyes off of Meacham, however, whom he suspected of entertaining the idea that he was responsible for the presence of the strangers in the swamp.

By and by Hyler said he would return to St. Armand's and give up the hunt for the day.

"Sorry anything should have occurred to spoil the pleasure of the day," remarked Hynes. "But if you will do me the honor of joining me here on the day after to-morrow I can promise you a fine day's sport. I shall remain here three days longer."

"Many thanks for your kindness," said Hyler. "Don Lemada and myself will return to the city on the day you mention. We may hunt to-morrow on the lower end of St. Armand's plantation with the overseer himself. He would have joined us to-day only business interfered to prevent."

"Then we shall not see you again?"

"Perhaps not," returned Tyler.

"I am sorry to hear that. I hope, however, you and Don Lemada will call on me when you return to the city. You will find me at the St. Charles Hotel."

"I shall do myself the honor of calling on you," remarked Hyler, shaking hands with Hynes and Meacham.

Lemada also shook hands with them, and then the two men, with the negro, departed from the hut.

Out in the bushes, Hyler quickly dodged out of sight of the hut. Lemada and Jim did likewise, lest a bullet from the swamper should stop them forever.

When they were safe in the bushes, the detective turned to black Jim, and grasped his heavy hand in his.

"Jim, my man!" he said, "you are a trump, a brave man. I understand the whole thing. You did right. We are not going home just yet. Stay around here in the bushes and watch 'em. If they go out follow them. They may seek to follow us. If they find you out and turn on you, shoot as quick as lightning. When they leave the hut we will go in and search it. We may conceal ourselves in it somewhere. You stay around in the bushes till you see us. Do you understand me, Jim?"

"Yes, marsa."

"Will you do as I say?"

"Yes, sah. I'se gwine ter do anything for you, marsa?"

"Ah, I knew you were game," and the detective grasped him by the hand again. "Stand by us, Jim, and we'll stand by you. Your reward shall be much greater than you have any idea of."

"Yes—your reward shall be great," added Albert Lamont, also taking the negro's hand in his. "Here's a revolver. Put it in your pocket. You may need more than one shot."

Jim took the weapon and quickly thrust it in his pocket, and was about to say something in reply when Hyler interrupted him with:

"Hush! There they go now!"

Hynes and Meacham were both seen hurrying from the hut from the rear door in the direction of the St. Armand plantation.

"Ha! They are going out to lay for us!" whispered Hyler. "Now, creep along after them, Jim, and don't let 'em get away from you."

Jim turned and glided away in the bushes with the stealthy tread of a panther.

The detective watched him for a moment with glances of admiration.

"That nigger is worth his weight in gold," he whispered to his comrade.

"He knows what he is doing," assented the other. "Do you think he killed Nesbitt?"

"Yes—or at least he thought he did. I'll wager my head that Nesbitt tried to kill him."

"No doubt of it. Now, what are we to do?"

"Wait until they are far enough away, and then go through yonder hut."

"In the daytime?"

"Yes—they will return at night."

A half hour passed.

The two men waited patiently.

"Now come," said Hyler; "let's see what's in it," and he led the way toward the hut.

Lamont followed close at his heels.

The door was not locked.

Hyler pushed it open and entered.

"Come in and close the door," he said, and Lamont quickly followed.

"Now you keep a lookout whilst I search around."

"Very well," and Al took a position whence he could see all around the little clearing.

The detective then searched through the hut for evidence of the calling of the swamper. In every nook and corner he found many things that would naturally belong in such a place. But nothing else was found, save the large iron-bound chest once before mentioned.

"There's nothing here unless it is in this chest," said Hyler, after a half-hour of patient searching.

"Can you open that?"

"No; it has three locks, and each lock a different key."

"The deuce you say!"

"Yes; and that's the surest sign that it contains all the secrets of the swamp."

"I don't know. I don't care to break the locks. If we make a mistake, we commit a crime ourselves."

"Just what I think. What's to be done?"

"That's true. You can't pick the locks?"

"No; they are the strongest locks I ever saw."

"Which looks all the more suspicious."

"Of course."

Hyler examined the locks again, and then regretted that he had nothing with which he could take an impression.

"I'll see if I can find anything with which to take an impression," he said.

In searching around the hut he discovered that one of

the broad, rough planks of which the flooring was made, was loosely held in its place.

Something prompted him to stoop and examine it.

He found that it could be raised.

Inserting his fingers in the crevice, he turned the plank over.

Beneath was a dark cellar several feet in depth.

"Ah! This may lead to something," he muttered, letting himself down into the cellar.

There he found boxes and rubbish piled about.

"Al! Al!" he called in a low tone of voice.

"What is it?" Al asked.

"Come here."

Al went into the next room, and there saw the head of the detective protruding through the flooring.

"Hello! Have you found anything down there?"

"No, not yet. I ought to have a light and——"

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Al, peeping through a crevice.

"I see Nesbitt coming toward the house!"

"The devil!"

"Yes; all covered with blood!"

"We could easily tie him up and work him, but I guess we had better not do it."

"What shall we do then?"

"Guess you'd better drop down in here with me, pull the plank over us, and wait till they go out again."

"We may have to stay in there all night."

"May be so; down, quick!"

Al leaped down into the place, and the plank was carefully turned into its groove again.

CHAPTER XV.

SEARCHING THE HUT—THE WOUNDED PANTHER.

Just a half minute after the plank was drawn over their heads the two men heard the door of the hut open.

The heavy boots of the swamper as he strode into the hut were heard overhead.

The two men glared at each other in silence, and listened.

They heard him muttering to himself in an unintelligible jargon.

His lips were swollen out of shape, and the whole front row of teeth were gone.

No wonder they could not understand a word he said!

They heard him drinking whisky or something else from a bottle, however, and understood the language of that.

Then he walked about the hut, muttering to himself and swearing.

They could understand that he was swearing, as they caught the word "nigger" several times, and surmised that he was swearing at Jim.

Both listened.

The detective rose to his feet and turned his right ear up toward a crack in the rough floor of the hut in his eager desire to catch what was said.

"Blast 'im!" he heard the swamper say. "I'll kill 'im yit, ef he did save me from the b'ar! He's spiled my mouth, darn 'im! Whar's Meacham an' Hynes, I'd like ter know?" and then he took another look around the room, and another pull at the bottle.

It was a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all together; and the detective turned to his companion, and whispered:

"He'll be blind drunk in a half hour, or I am no prophet."

More mutterings and several more pulls at the bottle, and it began to look as though he would prove that the detective was a prophet.

But he did not get as drunk as he was expected to.

Those old swampers never drink water. They are copper-bottomed, and Nesbitt was an old hand at the jug.

He held on four long, weary hours, and then keeled over on the floor as drunk as ever old father Noah was.

Let us now follow Hynes and Meacham in their efforts to waylay and murder our heroes.

It was their intention to reach a certain spot where the edge of the great swamp lay close to the road, and there wait for their intended victims.

Jim quietly followed them with the stealthy tread of the panther, keeping them in sight all the time.

At last they reached a spot where they stopped and concealed themselves, rifles in hand, ready to shoot down their intended victims as they came by along the road.

"We must do it, Meacham," whispered Hynes to the swamper. "They suspect the quicksands. That's as plain as the nose on your face."

"Yas—they showed that plain enough," assented the swamper.

"To suspect anything like that, under the circumstances, shows that they know something about it. We must not let 'em get away from us."

"Yas—and ther nigger, too."

"Of course. He must have shot Nesbitt and then told the bear story."

"Gosh, don't I want ter git a crack at that woolly head!"

"Hush-sh—here they come!"

A profound silence followed.

Two negroes came along the road, and the would-be murderers were disappointed.

They again relapsed into a whispered conversation.

Some thirty paces away Jim lay concealed in the bog of the swamp, watching them.

He well knew the two men were not coming that way. But he had been told to watch them, and he was bound to do it.

They never dreamed of his presence so near to them.

Jim was chuckling to himself over his occupation, when he was horrified at seeing a huge panther glaring savagely down on him from the tree directly over the two would-be murderers. The beast glared till his eyes gleamed like an enraged cat's.

The negro well knew the characteristics of the panther.

He knew it caught its prey by leaping upon it from the limbs of trees.

He also knew that it never dropped down on anything directly under the tree, but sprang at an angle with terrific force; hence the beast was ignoring those immediately under him, and preparing to leap down on him, thirty paces away.

"Golly!" chuckled Jim, "youse ain't er gwine fo' ter git no nigger meat heah! Dis chile ain't good eatin', nohow."

He raised his rifle to his shoulder and took a deliberate aim at the right fore-leg of the beast.

Then he chuckled again.

"He! he! he! Ef I broke 'im leg, he drop down dar on dem swampers, mad as de debil, an' make 'em whoop!" and the idea tickled him so that he grinned from ear to ear, and shook his head at the beast.

But, seeing the panther about to spring at him, he again took a deliberate aim and pulled the trigger.

Simultaneous with the report a fierce growl escaped from the panther.

His right fore-leg was broken.

Down he went, right on top of Hynes and Meacham.

Howls, yells, growls, and imprecations followed thick and fast.

The angry beast struck Hynes on the shoulder with one

foot, and his four sharp claws were like so many sharp daggers. They tore his coat frightfully, and his flesh only a little less so.

"Help! Murder! Shoot 'im!" he screamed, rolling heels over head in the bog in his frantic endeavors to get away from the beast.

Meacham was afraid to shoot for fear of killing his friend. He clubbed his rifle and went up to brain the panther, when the beast sprang upon him and bore him back to earth, scratching him terribly.

Nothing but the fact that one of the panther's legs was broken saved the swamper from a frightful death then and there.

But Meacham was a swamper, a born hunter.

He didn't yell for help.

He drew a long hunting-knife and struck out blindly.

The panther was cut fearfully, but he fought fiercely.

Hynes scrambled to his feet and seized his gun.

He ran to the assistance of his friend, and discharged his gun within an inch of the spinal column of the beast.

The panther, with a despairing whine, sank down, and Meacham sent his knife home to his heart.

CHAPTER XVI.

OUR HEROES SURPRISED—UNDER THE HUT.

The battle with the wounded panther was a terrible one.

Both Hynes and Meacham were covered with blood.

They had been badly scratched.

Their clothes were torn in a manner that fully showed the savage nature of the beast.

"Blast his ugly picter!" growled the swamper, as he stood over him with his bloody knife.

"I'm torn all to pieces," groaned Hynes, feeling himself with his hands to see if he was really all there.

"So am I. Whar's the cuss as dropped 'im on us?"

"Eh? What's that?" exclaimed Hynes.

"Some cantankerous cuss dropped 'im down on us."

"Eh?"

Hynes did not understand his meaning. The sudden commotion created by the appearance of the beast had confused him to a great degree.

"I say that some blamed cuss shot this critter up thar an' dropped 'im down on us," repeated Meacham.

"Oh, yes, I recollect now. I did hear a shot right back there in the swamp. Who was it, I'd like to know?"

Both men glared at each other and then around at the bushes.

But they might as well try to see beyond the stars as to penetrate the dense foliage of that great swamp.

Jim had promptly changed his position round to the left, and concealed himself in a clump of bushes, whence he could see all the movements of the two villains and hear the most of their conversation.

He was astonished at their appearance.

Both were covered with blood-stained rags.

The panther's claws had done rapid work ere he was dispatched.

"Blast 'im!" growled Meacham, shrugging his shoulders; "I'll be sore a month from that 'ere scratchin'."

"So will I," returned Hynes. "Hang it! I wish they would come along."

"Everything's agin us," growled Meacham, in a surly tone.

"Looks like it. Bill Nesbitt wiped out, and both of us scratched by this brute of a panther."

"I say—hush-sh!" replied Meacham, "somebody is back there in the swamp, an' we must find out who it is."

"Yes, that's so. Let's find out."

Meacham picked up his rifle and wiped the mud off of it. Hynes did likewise, and then both started to explore the swamp in the rear of their position.

They soon found the spot where Jim had concealed himself, and instantly saw that whoever the party was he had been a spy on their movements.

Hynes was greatly disturbed.

"We are watched," he whispered to Meacham.

"Yes," was the swamper's reply, as he stooped and examined the tracks, "an' we'd better 'tend ter him afore them others."

"So I think. Can you make 'im out by the tracks?"

"No—nothin' more'n he's a man."

"Can you follow his trail?"

Meacham looked around.

The place happened to be surrounded with water, so that no traces of Jim's tracks were left behind him.

But had he examined the bog just ten feet farther on his left he would have found a trail to follow, which would have resulted in a death struggle.

But he did not see the trail, and so he shook his head.

"Then we may as well go back home," whispered Hynes.

"Why?"

"We are watched."

"Maybe so an' maybe not."

"Would he not show up if he was not a spy?"

Meacham scratched his head.

He recognized the logic of Hynes' reasoning, and was puzzled to know what to do.

"Why not find 'im?" he asked.

"Well, find him," was the reply. "I'll give a cold hundred to know who it is."

The gleam of avarice in Meacham's eyes betrayed the character of the man.

He loved money, and would imperil his soul at any time to get it.

"Wal, let's look for 'im," he suggested.

"Look where?"

"In the swamp."

"All right; look ahead."

Meacham began searching the clumps of bushes around, whilst Hynes stood shrugging his wounded shoulder and caressing the terrible scratches he had received from the panther.

"Meacham," Hynes called at last to the swamper; "I can't stand this pain any longer. Come, let's go home."

"I'm sore, too," replied the swamper in a surly tone, as he came back to where Hynes was waiting for him.

The two men then started on their return to the hut.

Jim immediately crept out of his place of concealment and followed on their trail like an avenging shadow. He was careful, however, as he noticed the swamper looking back every once in a while, as if suspicious of being followed.

Suddenly Meacham, on looking back, thought he saw a bush shaking, as though disturbed by some kind of animal.

Jim was there.

He saw the swamper suddenly wheel and hold his rifle in readiness to fire.

Holding his breath in terrible suspense, the wily negro saw that his life hung in the balance.

If the swamper should take it into his head to fire into the bush, the chances of escape were exceedingly small indeed.

"What is it, Meacham?" Hynes asked, with no little eagerness, on seeing the quick movements of the swamper.

"I thought I saw that clump of bushes back thar a-shakin' like," replied Meacham, keeping his keen eyes upon the place.

"Maybe you were mistaken."

"Maybe so."

"Shoot at the bush and see."

Meacham gazed steadily at the bushes, and the negro stood like a stone statue.

To move would be to invite death.

"I'm gwine ter shoot," said the swamper, raising his rifle to his shoulder.

"De Lor' sabe us!" groaned Jim.

Crack!

The bullet grazed Jim's shoulder so closely as to raise a blister on the skin.

But the Spartan courage of the son of Ham never flinched.

He stood immovable; and the swamper said:

"Reckon I was mistaken."

"Yes; there was no one there," remarked Hynes, as they both turned and resumed their tramp toward the hut.

"Bress de Lor'!" ejaculated Jim, drawing a long breath of relief. "Dat wuz de wust call dis chile eber had, suah. Doan want no mo' like dem. Ef dat man seed me dis chile would neber eat no mo' possum an' coon graby. Ugh! It most make my wool grow straight!"

Notwithstanding his great danger the faithful black hung on the trail of the two men like grim death to a salt mackerel.

He had no idea of letting them escape him for a single moment. He followed them like a shadow, and on two more occasions came near being caught, once by Hynes, who happened to turn and look back as he sprang from one bank to another.

They pushed on and still Jim kept them in sight. He knew they were going back to the hut. He also believed that Hyler and Don Lemada were there, and that they were likely to be discovered. But still he was to watch them, and he resolved to do so to the last.

CHAPTER XVII.

REVELATIONS UNDER THE HUT.

The detective and young Albert Lamont were on the point of raising the plank flooring of the hut, after hearing Bill Nesbitt fall from his stool to the floor in a drunken stupor, when they heard the voice of Hynes exclaiming:

"Why, here's Nesbitt, and dead drunk!"

"Yas, by gum!" assented Meacham, "an' he's smashed in ther mouth."

"Hanged if the nigger wasn't right, after all!" remarked Hynes.

"Yas; ther b'ar rustled 'im, sure," and Meacham stooped down and examined the body and clothing of his companion. "Blast his ugly picter, what'd he let a b'ar ketch on to him for, anyhow?"

"Maybe the beast was too quick for him," suggested Hynes, "just as the panther was too quick for us."

"Humph! A b'ar ain't quicker'n Bill Nesbitt, Phil Langham. A b'ar didn't knock Bill's teeth outen his mouth 'thout spilin' his whole face with his claws. Ther blamed rustler's gone an' got blind drunk."

"Well, he can tell us all about it when he gets sober again," remarked Hynes. "I'm very sore myself, and some of Bill's medicine wouldn't taste bad."

He picked up the bottle from which Nesbitt had derived so much comfort, and looked at it with no little disgust on his bronzed face.

"Not a drop did he leave for any one else," he muttered. "Hope he didn't tap the jug with equal force."

He sought the jug, and found it still half full of "alligator juice," and refilled the bottle from it. Then he regaled him-

self to his heart's content, whilst Meacham devoted himself to the task of investigating the injuries of Bill Nesbitt.

"I say, Meacham!" called Hynes, on whom the liquor was beginning to tell. "He ain't dead, is he?"

"Yes—dead drunk," was the reply.

"Well, let the dead bury the dead. I want you to wash the poison out of my scratches, and I'll do the same for you. I'm feeling awful sore. How strange it is that we three should be so used up and they not get a scratch!"

"Yes, blasted strange," muttered the surly swamper, rising to his feet and taking a strong pull on the bottle. "The devil's agin us."

"Do you think so?"

"Yas."

"Why?"

"Bad luck all day."

"What do you think of that panther business?"

"Somebody shot 'im an' dropped 'im down on us. I hyeerd ther shot."

"So do I. But maybe he was some regular hunter."

"No," and the swamper shook his head in a very determined way. "A hunter would ha' showed hisself."

"Well, look to my scratches and I'll look to yours."

"Yas—I feel mighty sore; we was never used up afore so bad as now. Strange—strange bad luck. The devil's agin us—agin us," and taking another pull at the bottle, the swamper set himself to the task of dressing the gambler's wounds in order the sooner to have his own dressed.

He hunted up a salve which had long been used by hunters in the swamp, and rubbed it freely into the wounds on Hynes' shoulder, after washing them.

"That makes me feel better now," said Hynes. "That salve is very cooling."

"Yas; an' it's mighty healin', too," remarked the swamper.

"I hope it is. It's confoundedly uncomfortable to have several long sores on your shoulder. I wish the man who shot that tiger-panther could have had a taste of him himself."

"Yas—or a bullet in his head."

Hynes dressed Meacham's wounds for him, and then they both took another pull at the black bottle.

"Bill got a hard blow, Meacham," said the gambler, gazing down at the drunken swamper on the floor.

"All his teeth knocked out."

"Yes—it was a big bear."

"Yas, a he b'ar."

"That nigger left the hams here. Can't we have some steaks for supper?"

"Yas, an' I'm hungry now."

"So am I."

Meacham cut several large slices from the bear hams, and proceeded to make a fire. It was not long ere he had the steaks broiling, the savory odors of which nearly crazed our two heroes in the rude cellar underneath the hut.

Two hours passed, and the sun had gone down. Our heroes were still under the hut, where they were seriously debating the situation in their minds. They dared not even whisper to each other lest they be overheard.

At last Bill Nesbitt began to recover from his debauch. He rolled over on the floor, opened his eyes, rubbed them with his dirty fists, and glared around the room.

"Hello, pard!" called Hynes to him. "You've had a bear-fight and a big drunk. How do you feel, eh?"

"Gimme a drink," growled Nesbitt, through his swollen lips.

Meacham reached out and handed him a bottle of whisky, from which he took a copious draught. Then he scrambled to his feet, and looked first at Hynes and then at Meacham.

He saw that they, too, had either met a bear or something worse, for the panther had torn their clothing very unceremoniously, and asked:

"What's ther matter?"

"Painter," said Meacham. "Yer had a b'ar, eh?"

"Yas, an' a nigger, too."

"Nigger!" exclaimed Hynes. "Did he help the bear in the fight?"

"Yas—hit me with his gun;" and the swamper made a motion toward his mouth with his hand, as he mumbled the words through his swollen lips.

"What! the nigger hit you?"

"Yas."

"What for?"

"I tried ter shoot 'im."

"Oh, you did?"

"Yas."

"And he knocked you down?"

"Yas."

"Who killed the bear?"

"Ther nigger."

"The deuce!"

"Yas. The b'ar was er huggin' me an' ther nigger shot 'im. Afore he could load agin I tried ter shoot 'im. He throwed his gun at me an' laid me out."

Hynes gave a low whistle expressive of his astonishment, and said:

"He saved your life, then?"

"Yas," was the sententious reply.

"Well, wicked as I am, I would rather be black Jim than Bill Nesbitt," and the reckless gambler turned away and looked out of the open door of the hut into the gathering twilight beyond.

He did not care to ask the wretch any more questions.

But Meacham wanted to know all that occurred. He asked:

"How did yer get hyer, pard?"

"Got up and walked," was Nesbitt's reply.

"Yas," added Meacham. "Jim come ter whar we was an' said as how a b'ar had wiped yer out. We went along of 'im an' found the b'ar, but yer was gone. Jim was clean upsot when he seed yer was gone. Phil an' me was suspicious of the nigger, an' we all come home. We couldn't hunt no more, an' now they're gwine ter hunt ter-morrow on St. Armand's lower plantation."

"I'm gwine ter kill that nigger or die er tryin'," hissed Bill Nesbitt, through his swollen lips.

"Yas, for he knows about ther sand marsh!" remarked Meacham.

"Eh! what?"

"Jim knows something about ther quicksand bed;" repeated the swamper, in a half whisper, "an' so does them other two."

"Then we're betrayed!"

"No, but——"

A low whistle out in the swamp caused an instant hush in the hut, and a moment later Hynes and the swamper Meacham passed out into the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE STRANGER—"UP WITH YOUR HANDS."

The reader will remember that we left faithful Jim out in the swamp near the hut after he had followed Hynes and Meacham back home. He knew not that Hyler and Lemada (as DeGive and Lamont were still known to him) were concealed in the rude cellar under the hut. But he had been told to follow and watch the two men till the other two

came to him again, and he was holding on to his work like a shadow.

Sometimes he could hear the murmuring of voices in the hut, but not what was being said. He could not help wondering, however, what had become of Bill Nesbitt, whom he had left for dead in the swamp, where he had the terrible encounter with the bear.

The hours passed, and the sun sank down behind the cypress and live oaks of the swamp. The stars came out, and the great swamp owls snapped their beaks and hooted at each other in the moss-laden trees. Still the faithful black stood to his post and moved not.

At the same time another swamper, who had not yet put in his appearance at the hut, had met a traveler on horseback out on the great river road, and directed him to the hut for rest and refreshment.

Guiding the traveler to the edge of the clearing, the swamper gave a low whistle that caused Hynes and Meacham to pass outdoors.

"Hyer's a man, neighbor," said the swamper to Meacham, "as wants a rest an' suthin' ter eat an' drink, an' I said as how yer'd give it ter him."

"Much obliged ter yer, neighbor," said Meacham. "Yas, sir, I'm right glad ter be able ter afford any one a little rest an' suthin' for his stomach. Git down an' come in. We ain't got no style about us, but we kin give yer a b'ar steak an' a cup of good coffee, with suthin' stronger if yer likes."

"Ah," said the man, alighting from his horse. "I see that I have fallen into good hands. I will stop over with you and——"

"Oh, we ain't got any beds for travelers!" interrupted Meacham. "We can give yer rest, food an' drink, an' put yer on ther way ter——"

"So I am to keep on to-night, then?" said the stranger, a tinge of disappointment in his tones.

"Not far," said Hynes, speaking up for the first time. "The house below here never prepares meals outside of the regular ones, hence we do that in the hope of making a little money occasionally."

"Ah, yes, I understand. Well, let me have something to eat as soon as you can, and then I'll go on my way," and as he spoke he followed Hynes into the hut, where a candle was burning on a rude table.

Bill Nesbitt was sitting by the table in the full glare of the candle.

The stranger looked at him in the greatest surprise.

His face, after his debauch, was perfectly hideous to look upon.

"My goodness!" the stranger ejaculated; "what's the matter with you?"

Hynes spoke up quickly and said:

"We were all three out hunting this afternoon. A huge bear attacked us, and it was only after the most desperate fighting that we escaped death, and mastered him."

"Indeed! He must have been a terrible brute!"

"You may well say that, sir," returned Hynes. "He gave me a blow on the shoulder with his savage paw, and nearly tore my coat off my back, with a good deal of meat with it."

Just then Meacham, who had been attending to the stranger's horse, came in and also joined in the bear story.

"Yas," he added; "hyer's his skin an' paws," and he showed the trophies to the bewildered traveler, who looked at them in awe-stricken silence. He could not in any way doubt the truth of the story, but he was more than disgusted with the hideous expression on Nesbitt's face. It was quite plain to Hynes that he was actually making an effort to conceal his disgust.

"Are there many bears in this swamp?" he asked, after a considerable pause.

"Yes—and panthers, too," replied Hynes.

"Are they very dangerous?"

"Sometimes. This one was wounded, and that is why he turned on us as he did."

"Do you kill many of them?"

"Oh, yes. We sometimes kill two or three in a day."

"Indeed! I didn't know they were so numerous in this part of the State."

"The Great Swamp harbors animals that have never yet been seen by man," said Hynes. "There are portions of it that can never be penetrated by man until it is drained and burned over."

"So I suppose. Yet I am told that men actually live in it—swampers they are called, who are said to be a very hard set, and——"

"Blood an' alligators, stranger!" cried Meacham, flying into a sudden rage. "We are swampers, an' ef we hev got sich a bad name we may as well have ther game. Up with your hands!" and he leveled a revolver at the stranger's head as he spoke.

"In Heaven's name, what do you want?" cried the stranger.

"Up with yer hands!"

He raised his hands above his head.

"Take all I have and let me go!" he pleaded. "I understand all now. My life is in your hands. Spare that, and I will never care for aught else."

"Yer won't tell on us, eh?"

"No—my life is worth more than my gold. My word is my bond that I will never say aught of what takes place to-night."

"Then we will spare you. Give up what you have got."

The man surrendered his watch and purse, both of which he laid on the table near the candle.

"Is that all?"

"That's all, except a few papers of no financial value."

"Now you may go. Your horse is just on the other side of that sandy marsh out there. Go right across the sand to your horse. Don't turn to the right or left. The road is just a few rods on the farther side."

The man turned and stalked out of the hut, followed by the three villains.

He walked straight toward the spot indicated by the swampers, who stopped just in front of the hut as if to watch his movements.

In another moment he reached the edge of the sandy marsh, and found that it was partially covered with an inch or two of water.

But he did not stop for that.

He walked right into the quicksand.

Sinking ankle deep, he stopped to pull one foot out.

"De Lor' sabe you, marsa!" whispered a voice in the bushes beyond. "Run ober heah, quick!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE RESCUE—AN HOUR OF PERIL.

The reader will readily understand that the stranger did not suspect that he was in a bed of quicksand at the time he felt himself sinking in its treacherous depths.

Even the quick, husky, half-whispered tones in the bushes did not reveal to him the terrible danger that menaced him.

He naturally concluded that the danger was behind instead of under him.

The three swampers were behind him watching him.

That fact he well knew.

He thought the danger was there; that they were about to shoot him in the back and in the dark.

Hence, he did make an effort to do as the voice of the unknown had suggested.

But alas! To his horror he found himself sinking to his knees in the treacherous sand!

An effort to pull the right foot out only put more weight on the left, and caused it to sink deeper.

Then, as a sudden fear came over him, he would try to extricate the left foot, only to sink the right still deeper.

The harder he pulled the deeper he sank.

The sand seemed to have the tenacious grip of a devil-fish. It never let go.

"My God!" he groaned, as a nameless terror seized upon him. "What is it that drags me down?"

At that moment a dark form darted out of the bushes toward him.

He felt the grip of two strong hands under his arms.

The next moment he felt himself pulled forward toward the bushes.

The sand held on to his feet as if determined to pull him apart.

Suddenly (and everything was suddenly and swiftly done) he felt his shoes give way, and his feet were drawn out of them, as by a mighty, irresistible force.

The next moment he found himself in the bushes, in the iron grip of a stalwart negro.

At the same moment he heard a yell of rage burst from the swampers.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Three bullets whistled through the bushes close by them, and the swampers were heard rushing down upon them.

"Dis way, marsa!" whispered the negro, dashing to the right through the bushes and dragging him along by main force.

But the stranger now realized that the unknown was his friend.

So he made haste to aid his newly found friend in his effort to elude the pursuers.

Loud imprecations and shouts of rage came from the swampers as they dashed over the quicksands into the bushes.

"Quick! Through the bushes!" cried Hynes; "shoot down whoever you see!"

The three men dispersed in three directions, revolvers in hand.

The negro and his charge left no tracks behind that could be seen under starlight.

In a few minutes the negro knew he was safe for the time being.

He stopped to listen.

"Ten thousand maledictions!" he heard Hynes exclaim, in a furious rage. "They must be found."

"In the name of heaven, what does all this mean?" demanded the stranger, in a tremulous whisper, of his unknown rescuer.

"Dem bad uns, marsa," said the unknown.

Hynes beat around toward their place of concealment, and the negro led the stranger still further away into the swamp to be out of danger.

"I left my shoes in the sand," whispered the stranger, as a brier drew blood from one of his feet. "Can't we get out into the road and get away?"

Jim—for the reader has doubtless discovered his identity ere this—thought a few moments before answering the question.

Suddenly he stooped and removed his own well-worn and heavy brogans from his feet.

"Marsa, my feet am hard like de alligator's hide. He, he, he! de briers ain't no whar when black Jim shakes his foot."

"Ah, well; in that case I will take them," said the stranger, "for my feet are bleeding and paining me very much," and he took the shoes and put them on his feet.

Of course they were much too large for him, but they protected his feet from the briers.

Suddenly they heard a low whistle on the other side of the hut, and Jim exclaimed:

"Dar! Dat's Marsa Hyler!"

CHAPTER XX.

AT WORK IN THE DARK.

Let us now return to our heroes in the rude cellar under the hut in the swamp.

The reader will remember that they were in a position to hear everything that was said or done in the room just over their heads.

They heard them escort the stranger into the hut, and then explain how Nesbitt's face became so badly spoiled in a death struggle with a bear.

"My!" whispered Lemada, clutching the arm of the detective. "They are sending him to his death! He will sink in the quicksands!"

"We must save him, even though we forever destroy our chances of unraveling the mystery of your cousin's fate," whispered the detective.

They grasped each other's hands in a silent, speechless compact.

A terrible danger awaited them in the closest bond of friendship and trust.

"There! They are going out to see him sink down in the sand!" whispered the detective. "Come; we must turn that plank softly and creep up, pistol in hand. Take hold there. We must turn in softly. There. Easy now. Up it goes. Hold steady. Now, let it lay over easy. There she is. Now, come. Easy."

They turned the plank over gently and laid it on the floor. Then they crawled up into the room in the rear of the one in which the robbery had just been perpetrated.

Turning the plank back again, they were on the point of rushing out, revolver in hand, and shooting down the swamp robbers, when an exclamation from Hynes startled them.

"Maledictions!" they heard him exclaim. "The fellow has escaped! Somebody has pulled him out! Fire on them!"

At the same instant they heard a volley of three pistol shots and a rush of three men toward the bed of quicksand and the bushes beyond.

"Come. Let's get into the bushes without being seen if we can."

The detective led the way out of the back door of the hut and made a dash for the bushes beyond. His companion was close at his heels. They gained the bushes without having been seen, and then stopped to listen.

They heard the swamper's exclamation of rage and disappointment, and also enough to assure them that some one had rushed to the rescue of the stranger.

"That was Jim," remarked the detective.

"Signal to him."

The detective made the signal, and in a moment or two he received an answer from Jim.

They both worked their way from the spot where they had signaled, and in a couple of minutes heard footsteps stealthily approaching through the thicket.

"Jim!" whispered the detective, holding his revolver ready to fire if he made a mistake.

"Marsa!" came the reply in the same low tone of voice.

The next moment the detective had grasped the black man's hand.

"Come this way; quick!" he said. "We will go away from here."

In ten minutes they were out in the main road that ran parallel with the great river.

They ran down the road at least a half mile ere they slackened speed.

Then Hyler, as we shall still call DeGive, turned to Jim and said:

"Jim, you are a hero. I am your friend as long as we live."

"And so am I," said the stranger, "for he saved my life to-night."

"How did he do that, sir?"

"By rushing forward and pulling me out of the quicksand by main force."

"Ah! I thought that was the way it was done from what I heard the villains say."

"Where were you?"

"Under the hut, till after you went out."

"Then you heard the robbery?"

"Yes, and saw it, too, through the cracks in the floor."

"Thank goodness, I have witnesses!" fervently exclaimed the stranger.

"Did they rob you of much?"

"Yes; of over three thousand dollars."

Hyler and Lemada both whistled their astonishment.

"My name is James Altemas," he said, "and I reside in New Orleans. I was on my way down the river to pay a debt owing to my uncle."

"Mr. Altemas," said the detective, turning to the man whose life Jim had saved, "we will have to seek rest and shelter at the plantation of Jules St. Armand below here. In fact, my friend and I are stopping there. You will accompany us, of course?"

"Yes, sir, for I have nowhere else to go. I am hatless, shoeless, and penniless. My horse is gone also, and——"

"You shall not suffer on that account, sir. Come on," and he led the way toward the mansion of the great planter.

CHAPTER XXI.

MORE MYSTERY.

After an hour's brisk walking the little party of four reached the home of Jules St. Armand.

Of course he gave Altemas a cordial welcome on hearing the story of his misfortunes.

"You are doubly welcome, my dear sir," he said; "and everything in my house is at your disposal. I think we can put shoes on your feet, a hat on your head, money in your pocket, and a horse to carry you as far as you wish to go."

"A thousand thanks for your kindness, sir," replied Altemas.

St. Armand summoned a servant to show the men to their rooms, and then retired himself. In a little while a profound silence reigned throughout the house.

The next morning Jim called up his master at an early hour to tell him that a strange horse, with saddle, saddlebags and bridle, was found tied to the front gate at daylight.

St. Armand went out and looked at the horse. He could not recollect ever having seen the animal before.

When the three guests of the planter made their appearance he asked of them:

"Gentlemen, did either of you leave a horse at my gate last night?"

"No, sir," responded all three at once.

"One was found hitched to the gate this morning. He had on a saddle, saddle-bags, and——"

Altemas dashed out of the house like a rocket, and rushed toward the gate.

The planter and his guests were amazed at his sudden movements, and hastened to follow him.

"By all the stars!" they heard Altemas exclaim, "it is my horse!"

He thrust his hand into the saddle-bags and drew forth a revolver, a few articles of clothing, and his wallet, which he had given up to the robbers in the hut in the swamp the night before.

"Do you mean to say that all your money of which you were robbed last night is there?" demanded DeGive, rushing to the side of Altemas.

"Yes; three thousand dollars—the amount I told you about last night. Count it and see."

DeGive counted the money and found it to be as claimed.

"I think I can throw some light on it now," said DeGive, as a sudden thought struck him.

"What is it?" St. Armand asked.

"They returned that property to prevent us from making a case against them. He cannot swear that he has been robbed of a dollar."

"No; my money is all here," said Altemas. "They have returned everything."

"Come into the house and have breakfast," said the planter, "and discuss your plans afterwards."

They went in to breakfast, and at the table the adventures of the night before were related to Mrs. St. Armand and her daughter.

Marie St. Armand seemed to be deeply interested in the story, and asked Albert Lamont many questions about the bed of quicksand.

"Do you think any one could be lost in that sand?" she asked of him in a whisper.

"I do," he replied. "Mr. Altemas was sinking when Jim rescued him."

She turned ashen-hued and said no more. Her heart sank like lead in her bosom, for she feared Hal Percy was lying in the unfathomed depths of that treacherous sand.

After breakfast DeGive, Lamont and Altemas met the planter in his library, and discussed the plan of procedure for the day.

"We have but little evidence so far," said the detective, "that can be relied on to secure conviction. I believe that many men have gone down in that quicksand after being robbed. Whether the sand can be made to give up the dead is more than I can say."

The day passed, and late in the afternoon Marie St. Armand ordered her horse to be saddled, as she wished to ride up the road and call on an eighbor's daughter with whom she was quite intimate.

A few moments after she left, our heroes, accompanied by black Jim, set out, armed to the teeth, to conceal themselves in the swamp near the hut, to watch the movements of the swampers.

CHAPTER XXII.

ANOTHER HUT.

On reaching the swamp about half a mile below the swampers' hut our heroes entered it in two parties. DeGive and Altemas went forward together to watch on the east side of the hut, and Lamont and Jim set out for the west side.

They had agreed on certain signals, so they could understand each other in any part of the swamp.

Jim being most familiar with the swamp, he and Lamont took the inner side.

By and by they came in sight of the hut where Lamont and DeGive had once concealed themselves.

There was no sign of life about it.

But Lamont and Jim kept well out of sight in the bushes, lest by some accident their presence there should be discovered by the swampers.

As they watched, however, they saw DeGive and Altemas go boldly up to the hut and peer through the crevice of the door.

It was deserted.

DeGive picked the lock and entered.

He led the way down into the rude cellar after relocking the door.

Lamont knew that they were there for the purpose of watching and listening, and so did not move from his position.

He waited silently hour after hour, and then he and Jim heard something going through the swamp on their right.

They looked at each other and laid hands on their revolvers, ready for any emergency.

But the noise receded, and in a few moments they could not hear it.

"Hadn't we better follow them up and see where they go?"

"Mebbe so, sah."

Jim turned at once and began making his way in the direction he had heard the swampers going.

Suddenly Jim halted, and motioned to Lamont to do likewise.

Just in front of them, on a little island of firm, solid earth, stood another hut, not unlike the one near the quicksand.

The apparent astonishment of the negro was a surprise to Lamont.

He saw that Jim had never seen that hut before.

"Didn't nebber see dat afore, sah," Jim whispered to the white man behind him.

"It's a swamper's hut, isn't it?"

"Yes, sah, an' dey is in dar, too, sah."

"Then we must wait and watch."

Just at that moment Bill Nesbitt appeared at the door of the hut.

He looked out as if seeking to ascertain the time of day by the position of the sun.

Then he turned and spoke to some one within. A moment later Meacham came out and pulled the door to after him.

They shouldered their rifles and turned toward the swamp on their left, entering it some dozen paces distant from where Lamont and Jim were concealed in the bushes, and disappeared from sight.

Lamont and Jim listened till they were out of hearing.

"They've gone," said Lamont, in low tones.

"Yes, sah, dey is gone, suah," assented the negro.

"You stay here, Jim, and watch till I come back. If they return give me a warning, and look out for yourself."

Lamont went forward and examined the lock on the door of the hut.

Then he tried to find a crevice through which he hoped to obtain a glimpse of the inside.

But every chink and crevice seemed to have been hermetically sealed.

DeGive had given him a bunch of skeleton-keys.

In just two minutes he succeeded in unlocking the door and pushing it open.

Entering, he closed and locked the door behind him.

On looking around, he found the hut shaped and furnished pretty much as the other was.

But beneath it there was no cellar.

In the inner room was a rude bed. Then a chair and small table were next found.

"This must be a retreat for those who wish to evade pursuit," muttered young Lamont, as he glanced around the room. "It seems that Jim was not aware of its existence until this forenoon. Meacham and Nesbitt were here for some purpose. They probably feared the other hut would be raided to-day, so they came here for protection. I wonder where they are gone to? Philip Langham must be somewhere on mischief, or he would have been with them. I will hunt around and see what I can find here."

In searching the inner room, he found many things hanging on wooden pegs driven into the logs. Several changes of coarse garments, arms of various descriptions, and blankets of varying colors hung there.

While he was engaged in searching the hut it grew dark. The sun had gone down behind the dense moss-matted growth of the swamp.

"Ah! it won't do to strike a light," he muttered to himself. "That would be very dangerous. I won't do it. They may return. The presence of a light would give them a warning, and probably prove my own doom."

While thus musing he was startled by hearing a signal of danger from Jim out in the swamp.

He sprang to the door and peered out.

To his horror he saw the forms of two men approaching.

One of them bore a woman in his arms who seemed to have fainted.

Escape by the door was now an impossibility.

To dash out and thus confront them would be to invite immediate death.

He thought quickly, and then darted into the inner room and concealed himself under the blanket that hung against the wall, revolver in hand.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MARIE ST. ARMAND'S TERRIBLE ACCUSATION.

Scarcely had he snugly ensconced himself behind the blanket ere he heard the key turn in the lock of the outer door.

Knowing that they would have to light a candle before anything could be seen, Lamont drew his knife and cut a hole in the blanket right in front of his face.

By the time the blanket was still again he heard one of the men stalk into the room and lay something on the bed.

"Strike a light, Meacham," he heard the man say, and recognized the voice of Hynes; "I'm afraid she is dead from fright."

"Oh, them wimmen folks kin go clean dead in er faint," said Meacham, groping about for the matches. "But they allers come round ergin. They don't die that way. But I'm afeard yer've done er bad thing in ketchin' her. Her dad will raise old Harry, an' sarch the swamp for her, mebbe."

"My goodness!" Lamont groaned inwardly as he heard the words of the rascal; "they have captured Marie St. Armand! It can be none other than she! What shall I do? Rush out and shoot them down now, or wait for a better chance?"

Just then Meacham struck a match. The candle was lighted, and by the aid of the light that streamed through the door, Lamont discovered the pallid face of Marie St. Armand as she lay on the rude bed.

"Come here with the light, Meacham," called Hynes. "She seems very still and cold. I—I—don't half like it."

Meacham came with the candle, and held it over her face.

Lamont looked at her pallid beauty and involuntarily cocked his revolver. She seemed so like one dead that he

fain would believe her so, and wanted to avenge her death even at the expense of his own life.

He saw the gambler look hard at the sweet face before him, and then hold his lips close to hers.

"Ah! she breathes!" he exclaimed. "She is not dead. 'Tis only a swoon. Set the candle on the table, and bring me some water."

Meacham obeyed as though he were a mere servant, and a moment or two later returned with a tin cup full of water.

Not until the last drop was cast on the pallid face did any sign of consciousness appear.

Then it was only a moan—deep, despairing moan. The eyelids quivered, but did not open.

A minute later Albert Lamont, under the blanket against the wall, caught the villainous odor of a pipe, and knew that Meacham was indulging in a smoke.

The young girl slowly recovered consciousness.

She opened her eyes and glared around her like one in a dream.

Hynes stood by the little table with folded arms and watched her.

Suddenly she threw her hands up to her face, rubbed her eyes, and again gazed around the dimly lighted room.

Then she sprang up on the bed.

"Where am I?" she exclaimed.

Then, as if suddenly recollecting the occurrences of the evening, she cried out:

"Oh, heaven protect me!" and fell back on the bed, as if again to sink into a death-like swoon.

"Marie! Marie!" cried Hynes—Philip Langham, as she knew him—"you are safe here with me. No harm shall befall you. Why make yourself so utterly miserable?"

"Villain! miscreant!" she cried. "Safe with you! I would rather claim the protection of the evil one than trust myself with one so base and cowardly as thou art!"

"Hear me, Marie. You do me an injustice, indeed you do."

"Do you an injustice! You, a murderer, a gambler, and robber!"

Langham staggered backward, as if stricken a terrible blow.

"Murderer!" he exclaimed, regaining his speech. "Who says I am a murderer? I am guilty of nothing, save loving you and seeking to make you my wife. If that is a crime, then——"

"You speak of love! Such a wretch is incapable of loving!" cried the beauteous maiden, springing off the bed and confronting him. "You are a murderer, Philip Langham! A robber, gambler, murderer, and now this outrage is added to your catalogue of crimes!"

Again he paled, and stammered:

"Who accuses me of—murder?"

"I do!" she exclaimed, straightening herself to her full height and looking him full in the face. "You and the cowardly swampers murdered Hal Percy!"

"It is false!" he hissed. "What fiend has been poisoning your mind against me? Marie St. Armand, I swear to——"

"No, no, no!" she cried. "It is true! it is true! His grave has been found. He sleeps under the cruel quicksands, where you and your demon swampers consigned him—murderer!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

Had the earth opened to swallow up the hut in which he stood, Philip Langham could not have been more astonished than he was when Marie accused him and the swampers of putting Hal Percy under the quicksands.

"You have seized and brought me here to force me into

a marriage with you," said the dauntless maiden, as she saw how cowed he was; "but I would rather suffer ten thousand deaths than link myself to a loathsome murderer. Even now the law is on your trail, and the gallows will swing you all into eternity unless you cheat it by burying yourselves under the quicksand with your innocent victims."

"It is false! It is false!" screamed Philip Langham, his eyes glaring like a madman's. "You shall yet be mine, Marie St. Armand! You shall not frighten me out of my prize. I have sold my soul to Satan to possess you, and you are mine! You shall not escape me! No—no! You shall not escape me! All the minions of the law in the State may search in vain. They cannot reach you here. They cannot find you! I know nothing about Hal Percy! Do not know who he is or was. I only know that I love you as man never loved woman before, and am willing to sell my soul to call you my own! Will you be mine willingly, or shall I use force to make you my wife?"

"Never! Never! Thrice welcome death rather than be a wife to such a wretch like you!"

He darted toward her.

She uttered a scream and ran toward the door that led into the other room.

Just as she reached the door Meacham caught her in his arms.

She gave a despairing scream.

Like a flash Albert Lamont sprang from behind the blanket, and sent a bullet crashing through Meacham's brain.

The swamper threw up both hands, and staggering backwards, fell heavily to the floor.

Marie St. Armand recoiled, thinking Langham had shot at her.

But Langham wheeled to see whence came the shot, and found himself looking into the smoking muzzle of Don Lemada's revolver.

"Betrayed!" he gasped, as he recoiled with a look of baffled desperation on his face.

"Up with your hands, or death is yours!" cried Albert, sternly.

Hearing his voice, Marie wheeled round and recognized, with a glad cry:

"Oh, Mr. Lamont, you have saved me!"

"Lamont!" exclaimed Langham, his face growing perfectly livid with fear and rage.

"Yes—Albert Lamont," said the young man, "and you are Philip Langham, the gambler and murderer. My friend Hyler is Antoine DeGive, the famous detective."

With a yell of rage Langham sprang forward and knocked the revolver downward. But it exploded, and the bullet entered his abdomen. He uttered a shriek and sank down to the floor.

Rap, rap, rap! on the door.

"Marsa—marsa!" called Jim's voice.

"Oh, that's faithful Jim!" cried Marie, running to the door and opening it.

Jim came in, with rifle and revolver in hand.

"Oh, Jim," cried his young mistress, "I am saved! Thank God, and you, and Mr. Lamont!"

"Bress de Lor—hallelujah!" cried the black, tears running down his ebon face as he kissed her hand.

Turning away, Marie caught sight of Albert's face. There was a look there that caused her to blush crimson.

Then, with a glad cry, she sprang forward, threw her arms about his neck and kissed him.

"You have saved me from a fate worse than death! I owe you my life."

"I would have died to save you, Marie," he said, pressing her to his heart.

"Curses on both of you!" screamed Langham, in an agony of pain, foaming at the mouth, rolling over and over on the floor.

"Better be trying to remove the curse of Heaven from your own soul, Langham," said Lamont, "for you have not long to live. Your curses can do nobody any harm. Did you murder Hal Percy?"

The dying man made no reply save to glare his intense hate at his slayer.

A few minutes passed, and the doomed gambler grew weaker and weaker.

"Did you kill Hal Percy?"

"No; he—sank—in—the quicksand!" was the reply, and the next moment he gave a gasp and died.

"Poor Hal!" moaned Albert, burying his face in his hands.

"Oh, my poor heart!" moaned Marie, and a moment later she sank to the floor in another death-like swoon.

Instantly Lamont seized her in his arms and bore her to the bed.

"Jim, get some water, quick!"

Jim seized the tin cup that was still on the table and ran out to find some in the swamp.

Just as he passed out of the door he met Bill Nesbitt.

He instantly recognized him.

Nesbitt saw by the light that came from within how matters stood.

He raised his rifle to fire at Jim.

The negro sprang upon him, bore him to the earth, and held him by the throat until life was extinct.

He was strong as a giant.

"Dar, now," he said, "youse is done gone to de debbil now."

"We must remain here till morning," he said, "as we can't find our way out of the swamp in the dark."

"I am not afraid to remain here with two such protectors," said she. "I know you will see that I am delivered safely in the morning to my parents."

Marie St. Armand was restored to her parents, but the body of her lover, Hal Percy, was never found. The quick sands would not yield up its victims. The swampers cleared out for parts unknown, a fact which showed that all were equally guilty.

A year later Albert married Marie St. Armand and carried her to New Orleans, where they reside to this day. Their four beautiful children are familiar with the story of The Hut in the Swamp, and the terrible adventures of their parents.

THE END.

Read "TOM AND THE TIGER; OR, THE BOY WITH THE IRON EYES," by Berton Bertrew, which will be the next number (626) of "Pluck and Luck."

SPECIAL NOTICE. All back numbers of this weekly except the following are in print: 1 to 5, 7, 8, 10 to 25, 27, 29 to 36, 38 to 40, 42, 43, 48 to 51, 53 to 55, 57, 58, 60, 62, 64, 66 to 69, 71, 72, 75, 81, 84 to 86, 88, 89, 92 to 94, 99, 100, 102, 105, 107, 109, 110, 116, 119, 124 to 126, 132, 140, 163, 166, 171, 179 to 181, 212, 216, 247, 257, 265. If you cannot obtain the ones you want from any newsdealer, send the price in money or postage stamps by mail to FRANK TOUSEY, PUBLISHER, 24 UNION SQUARE, New York, and you will receive the copies you order, by return mail.

Pluck and Luck.

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THINGS OF INTEREST.

John Haberle lives five miles south of St. Joseph. Recently he planted forty fruit trees, and a day or two later some thieves dug the trees up in the night and carried them away, presumably to plant them again. They left the ground and the fence.

With the modern skyscraping office building has come a new form of building scaffold. In stead of constructing the scaffold from below, which is impossible in the cases of buildings ranging from ten to fifty stories, platforms are suspended from the steel girders above. On these swinging platforms the bricklayers work, and the scaffold is raised as the work progresses.

A new design in fancy wall-paper patterns comes from Kansas City; also a way to utilize canceled checks. A firm has had all its offices papered with old checks, placed neatly edge to edge. The face figures of the checks vary from \$30,000 to \$1,000, and the total for one roo mis \$8,000,000. As a gilt mounting runs around the edges of each check-panel, the general effect is rather pleasing.

It struck him, just after he gave his order to have a duplicate made of a key, that it would be a bad thing to give his address, too. Even though the locksmith might be, and probably was, perfectly honest, there might be some one in the shop who wasn't, and who might take advantage of knowing his address to burglarious ends. So he told the locksmith when the man asked for the address, "Never mind. I'll call back for it." The keymaker looked at him and said: "I suppose you're one of the suspicious ones. We get them all the time in the trade. There are lots of folks who won't give us their addresses."

A flock of pigeons making headquarters in a courthouse is nothing unusual, but when a pigeon that is stone blind can find its way home to the cupola of a courthouse it is decidedly unusual. Such, however, is the case in Lamar, Mo., as it has been discovered that one of the pigeons making headquarters over the hall of justice is as blind as the goddess in whose shrine it nests. Nevertheless it flits back and forth as safe as you please, and it has never been known to miss getting in the right crack. It is stated that when flying for the cupola it flies up fifty or seventy-five feet in the air, circles around several times and then makes a bee line for the eyrie as accurately as its mates that can see.

"One of the chief dangers to travelers in crossing such dreary and arid wastes as the far-famed Death Valley in Nevada arises from ignorance as to the character of the infrequent pools of water along the route," said T. E. Smalley, a mining engineer of Denver. "The tenderfoot, growing faint under a blazing sun, will want to quench his intolerable thirst when he comes to a shallow hole, whose water, clear as crystal, seems absolutely pure. He can with difficulty be restrained from drinking it by some experienced companion, who knows that one draught will probably cause serious if not fatal illness. This water, for all its seeming purity and clearness, is loaded with arsenic, and many a man has lost his life by its use. Curiously enough, the only water in the desert that is safe to drink is foul-looking and inhabited by bugs and snakes. When you come to a muddy pool on the surface of which insects are disporting themselves, however repulsive it may be both to the eye and palate, you may drink it with impunity, despite its looks, as a man will who is crazy with thirst produced by the burning sands and merciless sun."

OUR COMIC COLUMN.

Bill—I never sleep at Sunday chapel any more. Jack—Broken yourself of the habit? Bill—No; quit goin'.

Edna—Did you jump when he kissed you under the mistletoe? Camille—I had to. He is 6 feet 2, and I am only 4 feet 6.

"Have you many married salesladies in this store?" "Yes; quite a few." "What do their husbands do for a living?" "Er—their wives are still salesladies."

"Opportunity knocks occasionally at every man's door," said Uncle Eben; "but if you sits aroun' in de rockin' chair waitin' for it, you's purty sure to fall asleep an' miss it."

Chicago Man (on Washington Limited)—Hello! What's the matter? Conductor—Matter? "Yes; what are you stopping here for?" "This is Philadelphia." "Well, I'll be dinged! I intended to take the through express, and I've struck a way train."

Great Editor—Why in the world don't you advertise your address in the newspapers? Eminent Physician—People would think me a quack. Why don't you sign your name to the articles you write for your paper? Great Editor—People would think me a goose.

A little girl was riding on the train with her mother, and as they approached a large city the child said: "Why, mamma, this don't look like a big place." "This is only the outskirts," replied the mother. Presently they came to a small place, consisting of a store, a few houses, and a water tank. The little girl eyed it with interest and finally remarked: "Mamma, this town hasn't any skirts."

Billson—Whose pocketbook is that you are advertising for? Jimson—Mine, of course. "Get out. 'Pocketbook containing a roll of bills and a large number of checks and securities. Finder can keep money if he will return papers.' Get out! You don't see a roll of bills or a check once a year." "N-o; but Bertha Bullion's father takes the papers I advertised the loss in, and he'll see that advertisement. See?" "H'm! Where did you get the money to pay for that big ad?" "Bertha loaned it to me, bless the darling."

"TAGS"

By Col. Ralph Fenton.

The sun was just setting behind the hills, long, golden beams of light standing downwards tinted and glorified the ragged boughs of the hemlocks that grew on the eastern hillsides, in the valley lurked the soft, purplish shadows of twilight growing deeper and deeper, an autumnal haze overhung the landscape. All was strangely silent, only the distant and faint tinkling sound of a cow-bell broke the stillness of the October evening. The air was keen and fresh. The white lines of the road, which wound like a dusty ribbon through the valley, was almost undistinguishable to Philetus Corwin as he slowly walked over it, weary with his long tramp from Glenham and eager for the armchair which he knew waited for him by his mother's wide fireplace at the red farmhouse.

As he turned a corner of the road this house came into view. A faint light of a lamp, growing brighter and brighter as the shadows deepened, seemed to encourage him with its tiny beam which fell from the sitting-room window, for he quickened his pace and climbed the steep, hilly road with renewed vigor; yet, just as he entered the yard, he paused as if undecided. He seemed to fear to enter, yet could not summon courage to go away. After hesitating a few moments he raised the latch of the door and passed into the warm, well-lighted room.

Mrs. Corwin looked up with a fond smile. As he stooped and kissed her she said:

"How be ye, Phile, after yer trip down ter Glenham? Ain't ye had no luck? Ye look sort o' distressful."

"I got the letter, dear," he replied simply, with a lingering accent on the last word, which was very eloquent in its expression of his love.

"I'll read it to you," he said, drawing a chair over from the fireplace and putting it close to her "rocker." She leaned over to the table and turned the lamp higher.

He took a letter from his pocket, and holding it under the lamp, read:

"NEW YORK, October 23rd, 18—

"DEAR CORWIN.—As I thought, I have been able to arrange the matter for you. I can get you an excellent position with me, and if you will put in what you said, you can easily clear a hundred a month, and in a year you can double that sum, only come as soon as possible. Love to Aunt Lydia.

"Sincerely, JOAN HYRST."

There was no sound in the room save the click of Mrs. Corwin's needles as she knitted quickly.

"That's all, mother," said Philetus.

"An' ye are a-goin', Phile, to-night?"

"Why, yes. That's doing pretty well. You know you said when John was here this summer that it was an excellent plan. But why do you look so solemn? You have been asking about this letter every day for a week; now that it has come you look so solemn. Why?"

"I don't mean ter be solemn, Phile; tain't my wish ter be solemn, when ye have such a good showin' ter get on. I know it's natural as you should be keen ter get away from here. This ain't no place for young folks as aspires ter be suthin'. I ain't solemn, Phile, only," her voice trembled, "only ye are all I got, Phile, an'—an'— It 'pears to me as if it would be sort o' lonely when ye ain't here. Of course I may mistake, but so it 'pears ter me now."

"If you feel so badly about it I won't go," he said, but with-

out much warmth, showing plainly in his manner his distaste for staying.

"No, no, Phile," Mrs. Corwin said, quickly. "Go, son, I don't want ye ter stay in this old place. I don't know nothin' about them cities. I wasn't ever to one o' 'em in my life. Yer pa used ter want to take me, but I said, 'No,' so I ain't never went, but I always heerd that they were the place fer young men—risin' young men with aspirations. I would not have you stay. No, Phile, go an' git rich an' God bless you. I only said it 'pears to me as if 'twould be sort o' lonely," and she looked expectantly into his face.

"But you have Cinthy!" he suggested.

Her eyes dropped; she sighed as she said "yes."

"True, Cinthy isn't like your own daughter, still it's been twelve years since you adopted her and she is almost like your own. She certainly loves you. You can't be lonely with her—"

"Cinthy is very good ter me, Phile, an' I love her—as ye say, she ain't like my own—"

"But she is nearly so," he interposed.

"She might be nearer, Phile," said his mother.

"Why, what do you mean, don't she care as much for you as she ought?" asked Phile, looking up quickly.

"I ain't meanin' nothin' especially, Phile, only I had hoped ye an' Cinthy might have fancied one another, an' then she would really 'a' been my daughter, see, Phile?"

"Yes, mother, and I——" but what he would have said remained unspoken, for at this moment Cinthy came smiling into the room to tell them that supper was ready. Immediately after supper Phile harnessed the horse to the old buggy and said he must drive off to the village to get the ten o'clock train to the city. He came in to say good-by to his mother.

"I will take the hired man down to bring the buggy back," he said.

"No, Phile, I want to go down to the village to stay all night with Maria Harding, won't you let me go with you? I'll drive the horse back in the morning," said Cinthy.

So Cinthy went with him.

Just before they got to the village, Phile said:

"Cinthy, I have to stop at the bank building to see Squire Barrow, won't you let me out there? You can drive on to Maria's with the horse."

"Certainly, Phile, only ain't it late to see the squire? The bank's closed this five hours, you know."

"I know that, but I've business there!" he answered impatiently.

So Cinthy said no more, but let him out at the bank and said good-by as cheerfully as she could and wished him luck in quite a happy tone of voice, but her heart was heavy and her eyes full of tears. It was ten o'clock next morning before Cinthy reached Mrs. Corwin's. When she came in she was pale as death, and sank immediately into a chair.

"Why, Cinthy, what's the matter?" asked Mrs. Corwin, anxiously, rising and coming over to Cinthy's chair.

"Oh, it is dreadful—Squire Barrow was murdered last night and the bank robbed, and——" Cinthy burst into tears and did not finish her sentence.

"Goodness gracious, Cinthy, do tell!" cried Mrs. Corwin in horror. "Poor 'squire—poor 'squire—I didn't think any one would hurt him—I ain't never knowed he had airy an enemy. But who could it abeen? Do they suspect anybody, Cinthy?"

"They think—they think it was Phile," said Cinthy.

Mrs. Corwin went over to the weeping Cinthy, and stroking her hair, said:

"Don't you cry, daughter. We know it wa'n't Phile. Why, no one would believe it was Phile—my Phile. Why, see, Cinthy, it's nonsense—my Phile went to New York. Why, he wa'n't even ter ther bank—I know he wa'n't."

"But he was," murmured Cinthy. "I left him there just about the time it—it happened."

"And ye think—speak to me, Cinthy! Do ye think Phile—my Phile—done this?"

But Cinthy neither moved nor answered. She had fainted.

* * * * *

Immediately upon Phile's arrival he went to call upon his cousin. Mr. Hyrst was very glad to see him, and they held a long conversation in the latter's private office, which resulted in Phile's accepting a clerkship in the office of Hyrst & Co., brokers, — Wall street.

"Now, Phile," said Mr. Hyrst, in conclusion, "about that money of yours to invest. How much have you?"

"Three thousand dollars in cash."

"What?" cried Mr. Hyrst, in surprise. "I did not think you would have more than one——"

"I did not of my own, but last night before I left Squire Barrow loaned me two thousand on my mill-farm property."

"Oh!" said Mr. Hyrst. "Well, you can leave it here, and to-morrow we can arrange about placing it. Now come out with me for lunch, and after that you can go and see about getting some place to live in. I know several boarding-houses."

After luncheon Phile found his boarding-house, engaged his room, left his valise, and started out to walk about and see some of the city.

"Shine, sir; only a nickel," cried a ragged bootblack, coming up to him.

Phile looked down at his boots; they were very muddy.

"All right," said Phile. "Shine away."

As the bootblack worked away Phile asked:

"What's your name?"

"Tags, mister."

"Where do you live, Tags?"

"Where does I live? My, ain't ye green! I say, I should think the birds would light on you. Where does I live? Why, mister, I don't live nowhere."

"Nowhere!" echoed Phile in astonishment.

"Leastways, I sleeps most anywheres and eats ter the res-terants. They gives dandy dinners fer a dime, where I eats—they does. Would yer like ter see ther place?" asked Tags, pausing in his work.

"No, thank you," said Phile, for the shoes were now finished and shone brightly.

"Here, Tags, here's a quarter. Take it for luck."

Tags was too astonished to speak, so he turned a hand-spring for joy, while Phile watched him intently. When Tags regained his feet he took the quarter, smiled and murmured:

"I say, you're a greeny, mister."

He made a dive through the crowd of vehicles rumbling up Broadway and was lost to Phile's sight.

There was a cry, a shriek of pain and Phile hurried toward the middle of the street only to find that Tags had been run over by a heavy brewery wagon and lay insensible upon the muddy car-track, while a crowd was rapidly collecting around him. The patrol was called and Tags borne off to the hospital.

Phile followed him, for he had taken quite a fancy to Tags, and felt much interest in the bright but homeless lad.

When Tags reached the hospital he regained consciousness. His first words on seeing Phile were, "Will yer stay by me mister, will yer?"

"Yes," said Phile, and he did; all the afternoon he sat by Tags, and all night, too.

Tags' arm was broken, and the doctors set it, saying that he would soon be out again. When morning came Phile left

Tags, promising to return by noon and see his little friend again. Tags hated to have him go.

Just as Phile was leaving the hospital the ambulance came up, bringing a man who had fallen off the train just outside of Jersey City.

"That looks as if it might be a serious case," said Phile to one of the physicians.

"It is. The man will surely die."

When Phile reached Mr. Hyrst's office, he found everything in great excitement. His cousin looked pale and haggard. He called Phile into his private office, and then told him of Squire Barrow's murder. That two thousand dollars had been taken from the bank, and that he, Phile, was suspected, and the officers were outside with a warrant for his arrest. He would have been arrested the day before, only Mr. Hyrst did not know his address.

Phile was dumfounded.

The officers entered.

"Where will you take me to?" said Phile.

"Back to your home at Glenham. To the county jail."

"May I go to a hospital and see a sick friend before I leave?" asked Phile.

"No; certainly not," replied the officers.

"May I write then?" asked the prisoner.

"I don't care," was the answer to this request.

So Phile wrote to Tags all about it.

And Mr. Hyrst sent the letter.

A month passed. Phile was convicted and sentence was to be carried into effect on December third.

Two days before he was called into the prison-keeper's parlor, where he found Cinthy, Tags, and a stranger waiting for him.

He greeted them all. Then, turning to Tags, said:

"I see, my little man, your arm is in a sling, but I hope you are better. Have you come to see your old friend die?"

"No, to see him live!" cried Cinthy, smiling, though her eyes were full of tears.

"Why, what do you mean?" cried Phile.

"Well," said the stranger, who was a physician from the hospital, "do you remember that man who was brought in the morning you were there? The man who fell off the train?"

"Yes," said Phile.

"That man was my poor, wicked brother, who ran away so many years ago," said Cinthy.

"Yesterday that man died," continued the physician, "but before he died he confessed that he had murdered the squire—with the purpose of robbing him—but could find no money in the place, and was afraid to break into the bank. I've his written confession made to myself and a priest. It will save you, Mr. Corwin."

"That's jest it!" cried Tags, "an' I came wid him ter see ye sot free. I am a-goin' ter see the gent what saved me," said I.

"But, Phile, why didn't you speak before?" asked Cinthy.

"Well, Cinthy, it was this way. I did not know anything about it until I was arrested, but then I suspected at once who had done it, for I saw your brother Ned hanging around the bank when I came out of it that night. I spoke to him and said: 'Why, Ned, I thought you were out West.' 'Well, go on thinking so,' said he. 'I don't want no one to know I'm here, not even Cinthy.' Then I promised him I wouldn't tell—and I did not."

In the spring Phile and Cinthy were married. Now they all live in New York. Mrs. Corwin and Tags are with them. Mr. Hyrst and Phile are partners, and now the firm is Hyrst, Corwin & Co., and when Tags grows up Phile says he will take him in because he saved his life and was the cause of bringing Cinthy to him. So Tags is happy, and is never done talking about the Barrow murder.

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